in our bedroom after the war

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in our bedroom after the war

by stereobone

Summary

After the war, Bucky and Gale reunite to fix up a house.

They end up finding a life together.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Bucky is standing in the center of the yard in his undershirt when Gale walks out with their lunch. There are blades of freshly cut grass sticking to his bare arms. He's staring up at the sky, hands pinned to his hips. Gale watches him.

"Thinking about flying without wings?"

Bucky turns to him and smiles. He pulls a rag from the pocket of his trousers and wipes the sweat from his face. Walks over to where Gale is setting their sandwiches down on the wooden table Gale fixed this morning. Bucky smells like musk and cut grass and oil.

"Well now, aren't you the dutiful little housewife?" he says.

"Shut it," Gale says, neck flushing hot. "I was already making one for myself. It's just ham and cheese."

Bucky grabs a sandwich off the plate, fingers dimpling the soft white bread, and takes a bite. He eats standing but Gale sits at the table. Looks to the sky.

"What'd you see up there?"

"Crop duster, I think," Bucky says. "Still can't get used to it, being back, seeing planes up there and not expecting them to open fire."

Gale nods, a little drowsy in the early afternoon sun. The sky is late summer blue, stamped with clouds. It could be any sky. They could be anywhere. Sometimes it's hard to forget they're not. They're home.

The crop duster passes overhead again and Gale tenses without meaning to, stomach plummeting to his feet. The sound of the plane's engine is a tiny drone compared to their forts. When he pulls his gaze away, Bucky is watching him.

"Yeah, crop duster," he says, eyes focused on Gale. "Like I thought."

Gale nods again with his sandwich stuck in his throat. When Bucky reaches forward and pinches his left cheek, he can't stop the smile. Never can when it's Bucky.

"We should get you a little apron, huh?"

Gale bats his hand away.

"You're insufferable when I'm nice to you."

"That's why I'm always insufferable," Bucky says, and stands in front of Gale with his back to the sky, blocking the whole world from view.

The house isn't theirs. It's Croz's. Or it's in his family, somehow, and has been sitting abandoned outside Des Moines for about six years—a two-bedroom farmhouse on five acres of land. A strong breeze brings in the smell of cattle from the neighbors up the road. It's achingly quiet in a way that reminds Gale of home, but the good parts of home.

He'd first offered it to them at Thorpe Abbotts, said with the baby coming, he needed someone he trusted to take over the maintenance for a while. It'd be a good place to unwind after everything they'd been through. Gale felt a twist of shame in him, thinking of being offered something like that in pity over being taken prisoner, and was surprised at the hot shock of anger underneath that feeling, but it didn't matter. He had Marge to go back to.

He declined and was surprised when Bucky declined too.

Once they landed back stateside, Gale and Bucky separated with a handshake and a glance that felt a lot like falling to Gale. He had a strange, terrible feeling that he would never see Bucky again, and he didn't know how to say it, couldn't say it, because the feeling made no sense at all. They were safer than they'd ever been. Life was waiting for Gale on the other side of this, if only he could find it in himself to keep living. He'd gotten this far. Marge was waiting for him.

He went back to her, and they got an apartment together in Wyoming. Gale didn't sleep for two weeks straight. There were noises everywhere. Little noises that he couldn't catch, like the lice that would crawl over his skull at the prison camp. And when he did sleep, he woke up strangled, reaching for the yoke, then Marge rubbing his back. Asking Gale what he needed. The trouble was that he didn't know. Even going out, everything would be fine until suddenly, Gale was jittery and on edge. He felt like he was frightening Marge, and felt terrible for it, felt at times frightened of himself, of the man he saw in the mirror who was physically home but mentally somewhere else.

Gale wrote Bucky three letters he never sent and didn't receive a single one.

The worst day of all was the Fourth of July. The sky lit up with fireworks, constant booming. All Gale could think was flak, air raid, flak. Falling. A man's face blown off in the nose of the fort. He didn't leave the bathroom all night, and Marge stayed with him, but her voice was far away. Never reached him.

Then Bucky called. They hadn't talked since last year. Said he was going to take Croz up on his offer, poor bastard really needed the help, and Gale ought to come with. He sounded chipper and healthy over the phone, had that teasing undercurrent to his voice Gale always associated with him. Gale had undereye bags like bruises he couldn't stand the thought of Bucky seeing. He said he couldn't.

"Buck, please," Bucky said.

The tone of his voice faltered, and Gale nodded into the receiver before remembering that he had to speak. He had to say yes, and he was going to.

"I'll—let me talk to Marge."

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah. Talk to the missus."

Gale cleared his throat. Marge was watching him in the hall with a sad, secretive smile, like she already knew.

"We're not there yet," Gale said. "You're supposed to be my best man, remember?"

Bucky's laugh was husky over the line, and he could've been right there laughing in Gale's ear, whiskey on his breath.

"I am your best man," he said, tone light now. "Oh geez, what was I thinking, I'm gonna be stuck living with you again."

"You? What am I thinking? You were a lousy roommate at flying school, dirty socks all over."

"I'll tuck them under the sheets for you this time," Bucky said, and blew a kiss into the receiver before hanging up.

They're both up before five am, and that's if either of them sleeps. Gale hears Bucky move around sometimes during the night, the floorboards creaking gently underfoot before going quiet again. He never mentions it the next morning. Whoever gets downstairs first makes the coffee and starts on breakfast. The house is drafty, swelled up from the summer heat, and sometimes Gale wakes up dewy. But he likes the quiet. All the rolling green. The smell of Bucky burning their eggs.

"Shit." Bucky pulls the pan from the stove. "Look, I never said I could cook."

Gale laughs and abandons his coffee on the table. He shoos Bucky from stove and takes the pan and spatula from him. The burnt eggs are dumped into the trash.

"You had the heat up too high," Gale says.

He lets the pan cool off a bit and adds more butter and eggs until they start to resemble something edible. Bucky watches him with his arms crossed, expression dubious. Gale throws him a wink.

"Think you can handle making some toast, Major?"

He laughs when Bucky scrunches his face at him, and he's still laughing when a slice of untoasted bread hits him in the back of the head.

They spend the first week in the farmhouse just settling in. It was clearly painted a bright white once, but it's dingy and chipped now, some of the dark green shutters missing from the windows. The wallpaper is all peeling, and the fireplace is furred with years of soot. Gale doesn't mind at all. The upstairs consists of just the two bedrooms. The only bathroom is downstairs. He and Bucky shave side-by-side and sometimes wrestle each other to get the bathroom first, just like when they were in flying school. The kitchen has a backdoor that leads to a field of grass, then the tree line, which hides a bubbling creek. There's no telephone and no television, but the radio works just fine and there's a washing machine in the cellar. There's also a barn that was once used to board horses, only it's mostly storage now, and stray critters. Gale sees a cat slinking around the rafters and leaves her be.

Croz told them there was an old Ford pick-up in the barn they were welcome to use if they could get it working, which they do, after they change the oil and give it some gas. It's navy blue, or it's trying to be,

except for the rust that's eating at the edges of the paint. They've driven it once sputtering into town to get groceries at the market and set up a milk delivery. Then the two of them stopped by a payphone and crowded the receiver together to call Croz. "You having another baby yet?" Bucky said too loud into the phone, arm draped around Gale's shoulder, and Croz said no, good Lord, no, and asked how they were getting along. "Bucky tried burning the house down," Gale told him, all three of them laughing, shooting the shit until Croz had to go. The street was silent after, unfamiliar.

They haven't left the house otherwise.

It's like being back in the military only it's not at all. No one is shaking them out of bed in the morning for a mission. They can eat what they want, when they want, which makes the choice almost paralyzing. It's been breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, and breakfast again for dinner all week. Bucky is still a terrible roommate. He smokes in the house and cheats at cards and uses all the hot water. Gale has never been happier.

They don't talk about the war.

He writes Marge a letter near the end of the week to let her know he's fine and that he misses her. He does miss her. He is also shamefully happy to be away from her, because he feels less like he's failing her out here. Less like he can't be the boy she once knew. But Marge had encouraged him to go, to the point where Gale asked if she was trying to get rid of him, only Marge was too kind for that. *I think it will be good for you,* she'd said. *Both of you.*

He sets the letter by the door and joins Bucky in the living room where he's fiddling with the radio. He's hunched over the side table trying to fix the reception, one ear pressed near the speaker as the sportscaster announces the game. Baseball, sounds like. Gale shakes his head and sits on the couch, a ratty old thing colored dark maroon that's surprisingly comfortable. Gale lets his body sink into the cushions. He woke up twice last night still in the stalag, then never quite got back to sleep.

"Ah, come on," Bucky says.

"Pinstripes losing?" Gale says.

Bucky waves a hand at the radio in disgust. "They're getting smoked."

He sits next to Gale, their thighs pressed together. Gale shuts his eyes

and lets the sportscaster's voice drone over him. He thinks about how they'll need to go back to the market soon. They need to buy paint and fix up the shutters. Do right by Croz. He startles when Bucky touches his face, index finger sliding down his cheek. Gale looks at him sidelong but doesn't move. Bucky is staring at his cheek, regretful. Gale's breath sticks in his chest.

"How'd you get this scar?" Bucky asks. "I never asked."

"When—" Gale has to pause and clear his throat. His voice feels so loud, suddenly. "When I went down. I don't really remember. Bit of flak must have cut my cheek."

Bucky pulls his finger back, nods. There's another on Gale's other cheek, but he doesn't touch that one. The room is quiet, even with the radio on, the breeze passing through the open windows. There is the sound of cheering over the tinny speakers of the radio. Then Bucky wraps his arm around Gale's shoulders and shakes him.

"And you're still a handsome bastard, huh?"

"Quit it," Gale says, half-hearted.

Bucky sinks into the cushions and groans.

"God, I'm tired," he says. "It's this heat—who knew Iowa would be so damn hot in the summer."

His eyes are sunken in a bit, and Gale thinks of the floorboards creaking at night, and he wants to ask, he wants to ask if Bucky ever walks into a crowd of people and feels like he's watching himself from the other side of the street. Not really there at all. Gale isn't sure how to ask that, not without sounding crazy. He's supposed to be the sensible one.

Bucky nudges his thigh with his own and says, "Hey, want to go into town and mail your letter, get a drink? I saw a bar when we drove in last week for groceries."

Gale sighs. "Of course you did."

"Aw, come on, Buck, let's go out, meet the yokels."

He looks up at Gale through his lashes, like Gale was planning on saying no to him in the first place.

They make a stop by the post office then get dinner at a restaurant before heading out for drinks. Gale gets a Coke. He hasn't touched liquor since he shared Bucky's flask the night the war ended, the two of them silent together by the control tower. Bucky gets a whiskey, and they sit where they can both see the door. The bar is oddly familiar to the pubs in England, low-ceilinged and claustrophobic, hazy with smoke. And before long Bucky is making friends and dragging them over to their table, introducing Gale to this guy and that gal, confusing everyone by calling himself Bucky and Gale Buck. They're both Bucky and Buck interchangeably throughout the night.

Gale stays seated mostly, watching, admiring the way Bucky can do this. He has no problem going up to people and introducing himself or making a damn fool of himself. And it's not just the alcohol. Bucky has always been this way, a person who gives love as easily as he asks for it. Gale is still amazed that they're friends sometimes, especially when they go out like this, and Gale is certain he couldn't charm his way out of a paper bag. It's Bucky who brings out that confidence in him, otherwise Gale stays soft-spoken and cordial with new acquaintances. He's always been like that. Somehow, Bucky finds it endearing. Asked him in flying school if he was shy and pressed his knuckles gently to Gale's cheek, like that was something Gale ought to be proud of, like Bucky admired that quality in him.

Bucky comes over to him perfectly drunk halfway through the night and presses his lips right to Gale's ear.

"I bet that nice woman over there a drink that I could get you to dance with me," he says.

Gale flushes and rears back. "You what?"

Bucky stares at him, then blinks, shakes his head, and bursts out laughing.

"I mean that I could get you to dance with *her*." He presses his forehead into Gale's shoulder. "Her name is Carol. She wants a dance, Buck."

It's a mistake, but Gale looks over to the bar where Carol is watching

them both with a smile on her face. She waves politely at Gale. She's very pretty. Gale swats at Bucky's thigh.

"I can't dance with her, I'm engaged, Bucky."

Bucky lifts his head from Gale's shoulder and blinks again, then seemingly sobers up. He leans his arms on the table and slots his fingers together, staring at nothing.

"Yeah," he says.

His face is paler than it was a few minutes ago. Gale touches his shoulder.

"Bucky, you good?"

"Yeah." Bucky turns to him. He doesn't quite meet his eyes. "Yeah, I just. I don't know. Feeling kind of tired."

Gale nods. He doesn't need to hear anything else. He pays their tab and apologizes to Carol for the trouble, then herds Bucky into the truck. The drive back to the farmhouse is silent. Whenever Gale glances over, Bucky is staring out the window, picking at the skin of his bottom lip. He parks in the dirt driveway and Bucky stumbles into the bathroom with nothing more than a "Night, Buck," before shutting the door. Gale watches the door a moment, then goes up to his room.

He wakes up two hours later to the floorboards creaking.

Gale listens for the sound of a door shutting and doesn't hear it. He slips out from under the sheets quietly and opens his door. Bucky's door is shut, no light spilling out onto the floor. Gale takes the stairs and stands in the living room. He's not sure what he's listening for. He supposes he's not listening for anything at all. When they'd been imprisoned, they'd all gotten very good at anticipating where each other might be, and where the Germans might be, at any given moment. It's like following a divining rod when Gale goes to the kitchen and steps out the back door. He simply knows.

Bucky is standing in the backyard in just his shorts and undershirt. His face when Gale comes outside is hidden by nightfall, but Gale can still see something hollow there, haunting, chasing. Even in the darkness, Gale can see the pulse in his neck beating too fast.

"Fancy meeting you here," Bucky says.

Gale swallows. He's barefoot, also in his shorts and undershirt. Feels like he should go back inside and let Bucky alone, but now can't remember why. He steps onto the grass until they're side by side, both of them staring out at the tree line.

"This where you go at night?"

"Yeah," Bucky says, after a beat.

"Haven't been sleeping."

It's not a question. Bucky nods, Gale can see it from the corner of his eye. They don't look at each other. Gale's stomach is all knotted up, his own throat working against him when he tries to speak.

"Me either," he says, like he's saying it around his fist.

Bucky shifts, turns like he wants to say something, nerves rolling off him. He opens his mouth and inhales shakily.

"I thought…tonight, for a moment I thought…Jesus, I thought we were back in Texas."

He turns away before Gale can even digest that and walks back into the house. Gale follows. Bucky is pouring himself a glass of water from the tap that he drinks down too fast. Gale doesn't know what to say and hates himself for it. He wishes now that he hadn't mentioned Marge and knows that's ridiculous. He wants to say that it's okay only he doesn't really believe that, not tonight, anyway. Most days, Gale wouldn't change what happened during the war, not a thing. Then there are nights when he wishes he'd never enlisted. Never got shot down. Never knew a thing. Nights where he is a coward.

"I just drank too much," Bucky says, and sets the glass in the sink. "It's fine, Buck. Go back to bed."

Gale realizes he still hasn't said anything. He shakes his head and closes the distance between them, hand on Bucky's bare elbow to lead him to the living room.

"Come on," he says. "Let's just sit for a bit."

They don't turn the lights on. They sit on the couch together, sides pressed close. Gale feels Bucky's breathing start to settle, even out a bit. Eventually, he leans his head on Gale's bare shoulder.

"Never getting the old times back," Gale says.

Bucky snorts against his shoulder. "You should take up motivational speaking, Buck."

"I just meant—" Gale squeezes Bucky's thigh, right where he knows he's ticklish, and Bucky kicks his leg into the space in front of them. "—I meant I like the time we're getting now. Together."

He blushes despite himself. Trying to be candid about these things is not his best trait, even with Bucky, sometimes especially with Bucky, but he means it. And Bucky seems to know that, of course he does, because he doesn't rag on him, or say anything at all. Gale grabs Bucky's arm and wraps it around his shoulders so he can lean into his body easier, and Gale lets himself drift back against the couch.

He wakes up to sunrise coming through the curtains and Bucky half on top of him. Somehow, they'd both squeezed onto the couch in the night with Gale pillowed on the armrest and Bucky sleeping on his hip. He's drooling on Gale's undershirt. Gale watches him, the relaxed softness of his features in sleep, how his arm is hanging off the side of the couch, palm up, and is struck with a sudden desire to press his palm to Bucky's. To lace their fingers together. The affection that kicks up inside of him at the thought is so intense he starts to tremble. It wakes Bucky. He jerks upright, then grimaces and rubs at his neck.

"Christ," he says. "You make a lousy mattress."

He pats Gale's hip and Gale twitches. Bucky doesn't seem to notice, still half-asleep and hungover, still leaning most of his body weight on him. Gale digs his blunt fingernails into his palm. His face feels flushed and hot.

"That the thanks I get for letting you drool on me all night?" he says, and regrets it immediately when Bucky plucks at his undershirt to look at the wet spot he left.

Bucky laughs at the drool mark and Gale shoves him, the need to be close and away from him two immediate desires. He can't wrap his head around the tenderness curled up inside the shame he's all too ripe with.

"Get off," he says. "Your breath is awful, Bucky."

Bucky crawls closer to blow in his face before finally getting off the couch. He stands above Gale pale and alive in the morning light,

suddenly awake and serious.

"Alright, alright, give me a minute and I'll make the coffee," he says.

Then, "Thank you, Buck."

He doesn't say for what. Gale nods and watches him head for the bathroom. He collapses back against the couch as soon as the door shuts. He's always known Bucky was handsome. Bucky is downright beautiful. The thought terrified him when they first met, so Gale shoved it down, the way he shoved down his father making fun of him for sitting with his legs crossed like a girl, the way he shoved down the feeling he got when Thomas Peters in high school watched him the way Gale secretly wanted to be watched by a boy. Bucky is loose and free with Gale, touches him like Gale's body is his to touch. But he doesn't mean it like that. He can't.

Bucky comes out of the bathroom and salutes him on his way to the kitchen. Gales shoves it down and follows.

They throw themselves into working on the house that next week. Croz had admitted that he didn't know how much work the house might need, and he wasn't expecting them to do everything, so Gale and Bucky start small. At least, Gale tries to start small. All he wants is to change the showerhead in the bathroom because the pressure is awful. The whole time they're at the hardware store Bucky keeps throwing extra tools in their shopping cart, alive with ideas and animated in a way Gale hasn't seen since they arrived. And since Croz's family is footing the bill for everything, he lets Bucky go a little overboard.

He lets Bucky crowd him in the bathroom while he changes the showerhead and shell out unhelpful commentary, the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile without his permission. He lets Bucky convince him that they should install a telephone, which is actually a good idea, just annoying, as it involves getting the telephone company to come out. The first person they call is Croz. He lets Bucky talk him into ripping all the shutters off rather than trying to salvage them. The two of them yank the shutters down and splinter them to bits in the barn with the mallet. Gale lets Bucky win when they wrestle to see

who will get to climb the roof to check for leaks, the closest to the sky they'll probably ever be for years to come. Bucky walks along roof tiles like he's hoping to fall just so Gale will catch him.

"Jesus," Gale says. "Get down if you're going to mess around like that, you loony."

Bucky laughs and climbs the ladder back to him.

At night, they usually end up in the yard together, not talking, just standing with their shoulders so close Gale can feel the heat of Bucky's body. Sometimes, Bucky takes a swig from his hip flask. Sometimes, Gale does as well.

Bucky is staring up at the stars one night, head cocked to the side, and Gale looks up too, says, "Cassiopeia?"

"Who now?" Bucky says.

Gale takes a sip from Bucky's flask and uses it to point upward. He's still not used to the taste of alcohol and isn't sure he ever will be.

"The constellation you're looking at. Cassiopeia. Looks like a W."

Bucky tilts his head further, ear tucked into his shoulder. Gale draws the letter just past his sightline.

"Ain't that the Big Dipper?" Bucky asks.

"Big Dipper is right there." Gale points. "You can draw a line between the two stars at the end and find the North Star."

Bucky says, "How about that," and takes the flask back from Gale, his fingers brushing over Gale's hand. Gale swallows and keeps his focus on the sky. He used to stargaze a lot as a child, all that time spent sleeping outside when his father lost their rent money. He points out Venus, the brightest visible planet, and Bucky smiles at him, the trace of horror in his eyes from earlier gone.

"We ever fly to space, they should send you," he says.

"Nah." Gale shakes his head, bashful. Bucky always makes him feel so bashful. "I just like to look."

Bucky watches him another moment, then pats his arm and points up.

"That's the moon right there, ya know," he says. "Whole thing is made

of cheese."

Gale snorts, cheeks dimpling. The alcohol has made his belly warm and his eyes heavy. He and Bucky walk back inside with their arms around each other.

Marge sends a letter back. *My Dearest Gale,* she starts, like always, only the rest of the letter feels oddly distant. Short. Marge barely mentions her own life, but she does include three recipe cards. They fall into Gale's lap when he opens the letter in the truck. He had mentioned in his letter that he and Bucky weren't much in the way of cooks, and she tells him to give these a try. Marge had been cooking for him almost every night since Gale came home, determined to get him back to his normal weight. He was almost there. His pants still sag when he puts them on, and Gale isn't sure his face will ever stop looking gaunt. Now, he and Bucky are living off sandwiches and eggs and bacon and flapjacks, the occasional meal out. And Gale knows that Marge means well, but he can't imagine preparing a roast for Bucky. Actually, he can. That's the problem.

Gale tucks the recipe cards back into the envelope and drives home.

He's in his fort that night, falling over Bremen. Hits the ground, hits the frozen dead bodies of his men. Something is leaking into his eyes. Gale wipes at his face but his hands won't work. He's stuck in his chute somehow, tangled in the long, uterine white of it, calling for something.

"*Gale.*"

Bucky is sat on the side of his bed holding his shoulder in the darkness. For a moment, they're at Thorpe Abbotts, about to eat their last meal, then they are in the farmhouse in Iowa, and Gale can't find his breath.

"Bucky—"

"Shh, hey," Bucky says. "I got you, Buck. You're awake. You know where you are?"

His hand moves from Gale's shoulder to his face, palm warm and dry as he cups Gale's cheek. Gale nods. That has Bucky smiling, briefly. He strokes his thumb along the scar on Gale's cheek.

"Was I shouting?" Gale asks.

"Nah. I got up to use the bathroom, heard you—just heard you."

Gale can't tell if he's lying or not and doesn't want to ask. He's just relieved that Bucky knows. Knows what this is and seems to know what to do. The feeling of Bucky's thumb on his skin is the only thing Gale can pay attention to, the rough callous that scrapes along his stubble. Bucky drags his hand down to Gale's jaw, thumb so close to his lips that Gale can imagine the taste of his skin.

"Shove over," Bucky says.

Gale blinks at him, still halfway wrapped in his nightmare. "What?"

"Let me in your bunk." Bucky stands and Gale wants to seek his hand back out. "Come on."

Bucky pulls the covers down and climbs in without waiting for a response, and Gale is glad to not have to give one. They've bunked before, when they were prisoners and freezing and holding onto each other for hope, and one memorable time in Texas when Bucky was so drunk he couldn't make it to his own bed. It didn't occur to Gale to take the free one. Gale wonders if Bucky really got up to use the bathroom, or if he'd been dreaming bad too.

The bed is just big enough for two. Bucky throws one leg over Gale's and rests his elbow on Gale's arm.

"Tell me something," he says.

"You creased the sheets when you took them off the line today," Gale says.

Bucky snorts next to him.

"That's not what I meant."

Gale knows what he meant. It just doesn't feel proper, mentioning Marge right now, how he got a letter from her, even if she seemed distant. Those recipe cards. He stares at the bump of their legs under the white sheets. Bucky's leg is solid on top of his, and Gale can feel a

film of sweat from the back of his knee, the coarse hair of his legs. It's really still too warm to be sharing body heat, even with the window open, but Gale can't make himself move and he can't make himself ask Bucky to.

"You got grilled all the time for not tucking your corners in when we were in flying school, you remember that?" Gale says.

"And my horrible roommate never helped, yeah, I remember." Bucky pinches the soft inner skin of Gale's arm. "That training instructor, what was his name?"

"Wendell."

"That's right. Prickly ol' Wendell."

Bucky's thumb and forefinger are resting where he'd pinched Gale, lightly rubbing back and forth.

"He died, you know," Gale says, to stop himself from grabbing Bucky's wrist. "Car accident outside Dallas."

"Oh," Bucky says.

He's quiet after that. The room becomes just them, their bodies, the sound of crickets noising outside the window. Bucky has stopped rubbing Gale's arm and when Gale braves a look, Bucky's eyes have closed.

"Bucky," he says. "You have your own bed."

"I know. I'll go in a minute."

He doesn't go. Gale doesn't ask again.

Bucky's enthusiasm over working on the house stops as quickly as it started. One morning he's making new shutters, the next he's reading on the couch, head pillowed on his arm. Stays there all day and hardly says a word. He starts smelling like whiskey from across the room even though they haven't gone out to the bar and Gale hasn't seen a bottle. Like he's hiding it. Gale has caught him staring at the wall a

few times, not even the radio on, and when he asks if he's okay, Bucky says, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You want to get back to working on the new shutters?" Gale asks the third time he catches him staring, and Bucky shrugs.

"We got time to work, we've *been* working. Was thinking about going to the bar, you should come with."

"Think I'll pass," Gale says. "I want to finish fixing those chairs for the table outside. Also, we need more eggs."

"Right, eggs."

Bucky says it like he's got something against eggs personally. He's been sour all week, and Gale won't ask him again if he's okay, not when he's like this. Bucky in this kind of mood is liable to pick a fight with the grass. They haven't addressed sleeping in the same bed and probably never well. That morning, Gale woke up to Bucky saying, "Good morning, sunshine," before he went downstairs to use the bathroom. Gale sat up, painfully hard, and turned awkwardly on his side until his cock softened. Then they went about their day like nothing had happened. And now this.

Bucky grabs the truck keys from the dish by the front door and tosses them up in the air, catches them in his palm.

"I'll get the eggs, okay? Stop griping about the eggs."

And he's gone like that, door shaking in its frame. Gale is struck dumb for a moment before the anger comes. He focuses on that instead of the worry. The house is loud now in its quiet and Gale can't stand to be inside. He refinishes the chairs for the table in the backyard, focused on the glide of the brush over the legs. The varnish smells like turpentine. That odd, nutty gasoline smell. Gale lets himself go lightheaded from the scent, shoulders drawn up tight.

The sun dips below the horizon. He eats dinner alone.

Gale opens the front door after, driveway empty as he knew it would be. Then he goes to bed.

He's woken up later by the telephone ringing. He knows immediately that Bucky isn't home, and the sense of panic that grips him has him taking the stairs two at a time to grab the phone before the last ring. His pulse flutters in his jaw when he answers.

"John?"

"Buck—hey, Buck, hey, darlin'."

Gale holds his breath. Bucky's words are all slurred together.

"Buck?"

"I'm here," Gale says. "You alright?"

"'m at the bar," Bucky says. "Stupid barman took my keys. Will you come get me?"

Gale rubs his fingers against his brows. Bucky is the one with the truck. It'll take Gale at least an hour to walk there. He tells Bucky to put the barman on and asks if he can wait that long. The barman says he'll give him thirty minutes before they kick Bucky out with no keys at all, then hangs up.

Gale ends up making it to the bar in twenty-five minutes. He's passing the neighbor's cattle farm when he sees their lights are still on and risks knocking on the door. The husband, who introduces himself as George, offers him a ride into town. Says he's always up late with the cows anyhow. Gale hops out of his truck with a rush of thanks and finds Bucky collapsed over the bar counter, a cigarette ready to singe his fingers. Gale plucks the cigarette out of his hand and Bucky blinks back to life, smile so bright at seeing him that Gale nearly forgets to be mad. He doesn't bother to ask what happened. The barman gives Gale the keys without a word.

The drive back is done in total silence. Bucky has the face of a man who's just gotten into trouble with his wife, and Gale is so tired all he wants is to go back to sleep. He doesn't have the energy to be mad right now and isn't sure he even will be in the morning. He helps Bucky inside and tells him to brush his teeth, waits by the door so he can help him up the stairs.

Bucky comes out of the bathroom smelling like peppermint, bottom lip still pushed out. He looks guilty and Gale hates him a little bit.

The staircase is so narrow that Bucky is practically draped over Gale's back on the way up. He hums sleepily into Gale's neck. Gale pats his hand when they get to the top and walks him into his room, then yelps when Bucky pulls him down onto the bed and on top of him.

"Jesus, Bucky—"

"Are you mad at me?"

"I'm a little annoyed," Gale says, practically eating the cotton of Bucky's shirt. His forehead is smashed into Bucky's sternum. "Let me up."

"Sorry," he says. "'S not you, I'm sorry. Stay for a bit."

Bucky's hold on him is tight. He drags his nails lightly over Gale's back, drifting along his ribs. Gale shivers.

"Stay here tonight," he says.

"I can't," Gale tells him.

"Yes, you can." Bucky nuzzles his hair, and he's drunk, Gale reminds himself, he's really drunk. "Tell me why you can't."

Because, Gale thinks, but can't even say it to himself. No one can see them, yet somehow, he feels like everyone can, because Gale knows why, and the enormity of that knowledge feels too much to hold.

"Because you're suffocating me," he finally says, hoping to appeal to humor.

Bucky's hands pause on his back a moment. Gale inhales and waits to be released. He's not. Bucky moves so that his front is pressed against Gale's back and holds himself there, an arm wrapped around Gale's waist. The alcohol takes him to sleep almost immediately after. Gale lays there, horrified and comforted all at once, aware that he is going to fall asleep faster than he has all week now that Bucky's arms are around him.

Bucky isn't in bed when Gale wakes up. He touches the sheets and

finds them cold. Gale takes the stairs down two at a time again and Bucky isn't anywhere in the house. He's not in the yard. The terror that grips him is so great he nearly collapses in the grass. When Gale comes back in the kitchen door, he notices a note tacked to the fridge in Bucky's handwriting.

On a drive. Not so drunk anymore, it says.

Gale stares at the words. He sits at the kitchen table and keeps staring.

Bucky gets back a little after nine am with a brown sack of groceries, humming something out of tune. He casts a sleepy grin at Gale when he sees him at the kitchen table.

"Morning," he says.

He clocks Gale's untouched cup of coffee and doesn't comment on it, just sets the bag on the table and sits opposite from Gale. The early morning sunlight has made the room buttermilk pale and Gale wants to scream at Bucky for leaving without telling him. Like the note made any difference. He doesn't like waking up and not knowing where Bucky is.

"What'd you get?" he says instead.

Bucky reaches into the bag and scoops out a carton of eggs. Presents them like a gift.

"Because I didn't yesterday. Got white bread, too. And that Clove gum you like so much."

Gale nods, exhaling for what feels like the first time in hours. He can't look at the eggs for some reason.

"I could've gone with you," he says. "You should've woken me up."

"I wanted to surprise you," Bucky says.

He stands up and paces the kitchen a moment, hands twitchy on his hips, before he checks the coffee. It's cold. Gale made it hours ago just to do something. Bucky pours a cup anyway. Gale takes a sip of his own coffee finally. He doesn't care that it's cold. He swallows three times to get the words to come to his lips.

"What the hell is going on with you?"

Bucky is staring out the kitchen window. He's not looking at the yard

or the trees or the creek, Gale can tell. He's not even looking at Iowa.

"Sorry I dragged you into this," he says to the window.

Gale watches him take a sip of coffee, then dump the rest down the sink. His hands come to rest at the lip of the counter, knuckles white.

"I don't know what I'm doing out here, Buck. Thought I'd feel better, you know, fixing up this house, but I still feel like shit." He sways against the counter, like he's not really sure of his own footing. "What did I come home to, honestly?"

"Don't say that," Gale says, propelled out of his seat. "You're alive. You came home alive."

They don't normally talk like this. Even mentioning the war has been done in passing, alluded to, not spoken outright. It's seemed like a rule they both decided on mutually, and now Gale wonders how much good it's done them.

"You're alive," he tells Bucky again.

"I don't feel it, most days," Bucky says, turned towards him now.

His eyes aren't red-rimmed, aren't filmy. They're just open and hollow and Gale hugs him without thinking about it because he wants to and because he can't stand to look anymore. And because most of all, he knows exactly what Bucky means. Bucky's arms wrap up tight around him. The kitchen smells like coffee and all the whiskey Bucky drank last night. Gale doesn't want to let him go, in every sense of the word, but he forces himself to pull back.

"We're going to fix up this house," he says. "What would the boys say if they knew we backed out on a mission?"

"That we finally gained sense." Bucky manages a smile. "That mean you're not sorry you're here with me?"

Gale wants to slap him and tell him that he was never sorry once to be in a prison camp with him. Hell, he was waiting for him. He's never been sorry to be anywhere with Bucky. Isn't it obvious?

"I'm glad you called me," Gale says, aware that his smile is soft and secret. "I'm glad I'm here. Come on, I'll make us some fresh coffee."

He spends the rest of the day close to Bucky, desperate to touch him

but afraid that Bucky will think he's doing it out of pity. His heart feels like someone has it clenched in their fist. Like if Gale turns away for too long, Bucky will disappear.

One of the recipe cards Marge included is for a roast with carrots and potatoes. Gale has been intermittently pulling the cards out, putting them back, pulling them out. He keeps them tucked in his bedside drawer like they're dirty photos or something. The more he reads over the roast recipe the more he thinks he could probably handle making it.

After Bucky comes home with eggs for him, Gale decides to try making the roast.

Preparing it is more terrifying than the first time Gale flew a B-17. He has no idea how to slice carrots properly or make sure a potato is cooked. The recipe card shakes in his hand. He looks out the window, afraid for no reason he can name that Bucky will catch him in the act and Gale won't even know how to explain himself. Thankfully, Bucky is otherwise occupied. He's been in the barn for hours, newly motivated to work on the shutters for the house. Gale wipes his forehead and shoves the roast pan in the oven and sets the timer. He tucks the recipe card into the far end of one of the kitchen drawers.

There's about fifteen minutes left on the timer when Bucky comes in the front door and Gale's heart leaps into his throat. He hears Bucky taking his shoes off, then his quiet footsteps descend into the kitchen, but he stops short of coming all the way in. His brows are pinched together.

"What's that smell?" he says.

"What smell?" Gale says.

"Are you cooking something?" Bucky walks all the way into the kitchen and inhales again. "What are you cooking? Jesus, that smells good."

Gale has the insane urge to knock Bucky sideways. He feels humiliated suddenly. In all the preparation, he didn't ever decide how he was

going to explain doing this. That Bucky has been drinking more than eating lately. That Gale understands what he meant, and he also isn't sure some days how to be alive anymore. That he just wanted to do this for Bucky. Take care of him.

"Buck? Hello?"

"It's a roast," Gale says.

Bucky turns his head in Gale's direction, eyes moony.

"You made a roast?"

"Marge sent some recipe cards—" Gale watches in horror as Bucky slides on an oven mitt and opens the oven door. "—I don't know if it's any good."

"Well, I'll be damned," Bucky says. "Gale Winston Cleven. You're cooking me a roast."

He shuts the oven door. He looks genuinely delighted and not like he's about to rib Gale for doing something so feminine. Some of Gale's humiliation slides away into pride. Bucky goes to wash up and Gale leans against the counter and watches the knob on the timer slowly tick down.

The roast is finished by the time Bucky is cleaned up. They set the table together. Gale stares at the roast, the glazed carrots, the steaming potatoes, and is a little taken aback. Other than eggs and bacon, Gale has never been much of a cook. He watches Bucky take the first bite. His eyes close briefly and his shoulders slump a bit, a moan slipping out from his lips. He points to his plate with his fork.

"This is good, Buck," he says. "Really good."

He takes another bite. Gale feels himself warm under his collar and starts eating. Bucky is right, the roast is good.

"Should've been you cooking that cat at the stalag," Bucky says.

Gale starts choking on a carrot, caught between disgust and laughter, and ends up laughing, Bucky wheezing across from him, until tears are squeezing out of both their eyes.

"I'm serious," Bucky says, when he's calmed down. "This is delicious."

His voice is unreservedly fond. Gale wonders if a sweetheart has ever

cooked for him before. He decides it's best not to ask.

They do the dishes together afterwards, Bucky washing and Gale drying, then play rummy for a while in the living room without really keeping score, their stomachs full and the two of them half-asleep.

"You want to bunk with me tonight?" Bucky asks, eyes on his cards.

Gale says, "Sure," without hesitating. They go up together without another word passed between them.

He makes the roast again, then meatloaf, then pork chops. Bucky eats it all up, smiling at him from across the table and telling him he ought to open a restaurant. The praise makes Gale flush down to his toes. He calls Marge and asks for another recipe and apologizes for not calling more. Marge tells him it's fine. She knows that he and Bucky need each other right now. Gale tells himself it sounds like permission, even if he doesn't know for what. He's been sleeping in Bucky's bed more often than his own lately. It's a comfort, to wake up to Bucky in the morning, to know that they can pull each other out of bad dreams faster.

They've made a routine here: wake up together, breakfast together, working on the house together. He and Bucky paint the exterior of the house and attach the new shutters. Croz sends a letter announcing that Jean is pregnant again. The news makes Gale smile, then makes him glum and listless for the rest of the day. He's not sure why. Autumn is finally here, and he and Bucky start closing the windows at night, shuffling back into each other under the covers. People in town recognize them as Buck and Bucky, and it's a good feeling. Makes Gale forget this isn't permanent and it's not supposed to be. He hangs their clothes on the laundry line. Watches Bucky stare at the trees, then turn, catch Gale's eyes, and smile at him.

Gale runs into the milkman one morning when he opens the front door after a night of bad sleep. He gives Gale a bright-eyed hello when he sees him, then his face falls, body language going sour when he clocks Bucky walking in the background singing off-key. He's only wearing his shorts. Gale feels caught out for no reason.

"Ain't this the Crosby family home?" he asks.

"Yessir," Gale says. "We're—"

Bucky bodies his way in front of Gale and shoves his hand out to the milkman. Gale can tell his grip is too tight.

"Major Bucky Egan," he says, then nods to Gale. "This is Major Gale Cleven. We're served with Harry Crosby in England. He asked us to fix up the house for him."

"Oh," the milkman says. He stutters, then takes his cap off for some reason. "Thank you. Thank you for your service."

Neither of them responds to that. Gale has heard it a few times and never knows what to say. Everything that happened doesn't always feel like something he wants to be thanked for.

"Should get the milk in," Gale finally says. "It's sweating."

He takes the delivery and shuts the door. Two bottles of milk cold in either hand. Bucky looks at him with one corner of his mouth twisted up, eyebrows quirked.

"You think the milkman would know how to mind his business," he says, like that's the issue, then takes one of the bottles from Gale to put in the refrigerator.

Gale stands in the entryway a moment and refuses to imagine what it would be like if the milkman was right. *You know,* he thinks, staring at the space Bucky left, hearing him rummaging in the fridge. *You have to know.*

He goes into the kitchen and finds Bucky digging around for the coffee. He looks relaxed and beautiful and Gale's jaw throbs.

"What the hell was that just now?" Gale says.

"What the hell was what?"

"The milkman, Bucky. Why did you do that?"

Bucky shuts the cabinet without getting the coffee out. He moves back deliberately. Like he's squaring up to fight.

"What, Gale, you worried I was going to let him think we're queer?"

Gale's stomach and chest go tight at the word without his permission. That's not what he meant. He's not even sure he knows what he meant anymore. He could have handled it. He didn't need Bucky to step in like that, defend them like there was something *to* defend.

"You think I was going to tell him that you sleep in my bed most nights and like cooking me dinner?" Bucky says.

"John."

He says it as both a warning and a plea. Bucky doesn't heed it. The way he approaches Gale is akin to predatory. His eyes are impossible to look away from. They've always been like that. Bucky has eyes that calculate, strip a person down.

"How much longer are you going to keep pretending that you're doing all that for me?" Bucky is close enough that Gale can smell the toothpaste on his breath. "That it's not good for you too?"

"Stop," Gale says. "I mean it."

If he takes a step back, he'll be at the counter, and he's not going to turn away no matter how much he wants to. Gale lifts his chin to even out their height difference, defiance boiling up in him.

Bucky doesn't stop.

"Just because you act calm doesn't mean you have it together, Buck. Who are you throwing this act on for?"

"I never said I have it together."

"Then let go," Bucky says.

He shoves Gale, once, twice, palms flat against his chest.

"Come on, Buck, let go. Let it out, let go already!"

He shoves Gale again, and this time Gale grabs his wrists and kisses him. It's nothing but a dry press of their lips and Gale still pulls back gasping, terrified, barely able to comprehend his own actions when Bucky grabs him by the back of the neck and kisses him again. He

kisses hard, tongue licking into Gale's mouth, not at all the kind of kiss Gale has imagined Bucky might give in his most secret of moments. His thumb is tracing the shell of Gale's ear, other hand grabbing at Gale's hip and sliding up his undershirt to feel his bare skin. It's too much. Gale wants more and he wants to hide inside of himself.

"Bucky," he says, swallowing against his mouth.

"I know," Bucky says.

And Gale believes him. Bucky looks terrified. Gale lets himself be kissed, walked back into the counter. The edge of it digs into his lower back but he hardly notices. Bucky kisses him, his mouth, the scars on both his cheeks, the long line of his neck. Gale can feel his erection press into his hip, and when Bucky shifts his leg and drags his thigh up against him, Gale gasps into the cool air of the kitchen, cock twitching in his shorts.

"Can I see you?" Bucky asks, thumbing the waistband of his shorts. "I want to see you, Buck, please."

Gale nods against him. He doesn't trust his voice. Bucky pulls his shorts down and Gale clings to his shoulders, lip caught in his teeth. Bucky moans. He moans just at the sight of him, and Gale can't stop trembling. Bucky holds his palm up to Gale's mouth. He doesn't say anything and doesn't have to. Gale gathers up spit and lets it drop into his waiting hand, watches as Bucky wraps it around his cock and strokes. Some sort of wounded animal noise crawls its way out of Gale's throat. He kisses Bucky to stop himself from saying something revealing. All that ends up being not enough. It's not enough. He has to touch as well. Gale pulls back, licks his palm twice, and shoves his hand into Bucky's shorts. Bucky jerks against him, hand stuttering.

"Buck," he says. "Buck, oh my god."

Gale has never touched another man before. It's not like when he's touched himself. He feels out of control in a good way, the weight of Bucky hot in his palm. Bucky has a tight grip on his hip, thumb rubbing circles near his pelvis.

"God, you're beautiful like this," Bucky says. "Knew you would be."

The admission spins his head. Gale feels his balls tighten, his release hurtling towards him so fast he barely has time to warn Bucky.

"I'm gonna—Bucky—*fuck,*" Gale says, and comes all over Bucky's

hand.

He goes dizzy with it, collapses forward into Bucky, chest heaving. His body is nothing and for the first time that is a good thing. Gale floats, half convinced he could fall asleep until Bucky whines against him, hips shifting.

"Don't leave me hanging like this, Major," he says.

Gale doesn't think. He doesn't have room for thoughts in this space. He slips his hand back into Bucky's shorts and strokes him until Bucky comes sighing his name.

The world comes back in increments. Gale becomes aware of the kitchen, first. The low buzz of the refrigerator. The linoleum under his bare feet. Then he can feel come on his stomach and shirt, his hand. Can hear Bucky panting in his ear and feel his hands on his hips, the touch light and ticklish. His lower back is sore from where it's been digging into the counter and his lips are tingling from Bucky's mustache. Everything hits him at once.

He darts to the side, rips himself out of Bucky's grip, heart plummeting when Bucky's face crumples.

"Hey," Bucky says. "It's okay. Buck, it's okay."

Gale doesn't know how to explain. His head is loud with so many different thoughts and he feels like he could vomit from the shame. He wants to kiss Bucky again. Hates himself for that. Hates that in the moment it felt right to touch Bucky like their bodies were meant to align as lovers. Gale retreats to the bathroom on coltish legs. He can't even look at Bucky right now. He washes the evidence from his hands and strips off his shirt, avoids his own gaze in the mirror. His breath is coming so fast and erratic that Gale doesn't notice Bucky come into the bathroom. Gale jumps when Bucky touches his arm.

"Gale, breathe. It's okay, breathe. Come on, look at me. We're breathing together."

Gale looks at him. He mimics Bucky's inhalation, exhalation, heart rabbiting in his chest until finally he is breathing on his own. He presses his wet hands to his face. Bucky's hand slides from his arm.

"Is it Marge?" he asks.

It's not, which is a whole other problem. There's thinking about doing

a thing, and there's actually acting on the desire. Gale has always been so good at keeping that separate. Being here with Bucky is stripping him to the bone. He can't stop replaying what happened in the kitchen, Bucky touching him, telling him that he knew Gale would be beautiful like that. He knew.

"Have you…thought about me in that way before?"

Bucky blinks. The expression on his face goes from bewildered to wounded.

"Buck, I've—god, I've wanted you for a long time. Long as I can remember."

Gale nods. The information is water rushing into his head, unfathomable.

"You're queer?"

Bucky drags his bottom lip between his teeth a moment. He looks pale and young in the bathroom lighting, suddenly unsure of himself.

"I don't know," he says. "Never really thought about it like that."

Gale wants to ask if there have been others. Other men. He wonders if they should call Crosby and tell him they can't do what he asked. This isn't the sort of the thing he'd want going on under his roof. But the thought of that, of leaving, makes Gale feel so hollow he could sob. Bucky hasn't left the bathroom. He's watching Gale, waiting for an answer that Gale doesn't have yet.

"I just feel all twisted up right now, Bucky," he says. "Just need some time to think."

"Okay," Bucky says, voice small.

He steps out of the bathroom, and it hurts. Gale shoves the feeling down.

He gets dressed and goes for a walk. The weather is cool, wind kicking up dust along the road and swirling it around Gale's feet. He hardly

notices. Bucky's face is haunting his mind, how vulnerable he'd looked. Not just in the bathroom, when he told Gale he'd wanted him since they'd first met. Even earlier, as they'd touched each other, Bucky's eyes reflected Gale's own—an endless well of affection to jump into if only Gale dared to do so. He nearly had.

When he was a boy, Gale saw two men kissing in Wyoming after his father lost all their money at the dog track and they were sleeping on a bench in the park. The dark still scared him then, even at eleven, and he slept in fits, woke at the slightest noise. Laughter woke him at one point, and he saw two men huddled on the next bench, barely illuminated by the park light. He watched one man put his hand on the other's knee. Then they kissed, tender and sweet, before pulling back to check their surroundings. Gale stared. He'd heard in church about what a sin it was, touching another man like that. Only he couldn't fathom then how that might be true. The two men looked at each other the way his mother and father had, back when his father could stay sober. Different, but the same where it mattered.

"Hello there again."

Gale snaps his head up and to the side. His neighbor up the road is leaning against his fence, hammer loose in his hand. The same neighbor that drove him into town the night Bucky had gotten too drunk. Gale didn't even notice him. He hadn't realized he'd walked this far.

"Gale Cleven, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," Gale says. "Thank you again for driving me into town last month."

"That's what neighbors are for." George watches him a moment, then pulls his work gloves off. "You want to come in, have a cup of coffee?"

"I'm just on a walk."

"Oh, come in for a minute. You look beat half to hell, son."

Gale is sure that he does, and now that he's stopped, he also realizes just how tired he is. George meets him at the driveway, and he walks back to the house with him. George tells him that he's in beef, two generations of farmers before him. He tells Gale about how he used to see Crosby when he was a skinny boy in the summer with a beak of a nose. He told Gale all this when he gave him a ride into town, but Gale listens politely the second time anyway.

He notices a horse grazing outside its stall and can't help himself staring. It's a beautiful Tennessee Walking Horse, all black, reminds him of the horses he'd see in Wyoming.

"You a fan of horses?" George asks, and Gale nearly trips over himself, caught wandering again.

"Grew up around them," he says. "In Wyoming."

"That's our girl, Tiny. We've really got no need for a horse, but my wife, she's a bleeding heart for animals." George puts his hand between Gale's shoulder blades and urges him forward. "You can pet her, if you want."

Gale moves to her slowly, clicking his tongue. He's got no carrot or apple, but once Tiny notices him, she trots over anyway, curious. Gale holds a hand out to her, palm up. Her muzzle is velvet and warm as she sniffs him, nuzzles into his palm. Gale pets along her mane. Smiles. He's always loved horses, wild ones the most, the way they'd run free along the earth. He even loves their eyes, despite always seeing something sad in them, like they know more than they were meant to.

Gale gives her a last pat and turns back to George.

The screen door squeaks on the way in. The house smells like bacon and a woman's perfume. Gale sits in the living room while George brews fresh coffee and takes the offered cup when he comes back in. George has a laborer's face, etched with hardened lines and a deep tan from time in the sun. He sighs when he sits on the couch opposite Gale. There are photos on the hutch behind him and Gale spots two young men in Navy whites immediately. George turns to the photos, smiles.

"My sons," he says. "William and Benjamin. Served with the Pacific Fleet. Served in the Great War myself."

It puts Gale more at ease, knowing he's around a soldier.

"I served with the Eighth Air Force," he says. "100th Bomb Group."

The look George gives him is a knowing one. He sets his cup on the coffee table.

"Yeah, you have the air of a soldier, son. Your friend, the one I drove you to, he served with you?"

Gale flushes at the mention of Bucky and sips his coffee.

"Yessir," he says.

"That's good," George says. "Good to have someone after the war who understands, really understands. My son William, he's in Chicago now, married a Red Cross girl he met. They take good care of each other."

The back of Gale's neck prickles. He understands why he didn't mention his other son immediately. He won't make George say it. There were so many times when Gale should have died over there, enough times that he forgets he's alive some days. Can't even believe he made it.

"Is it hard?" he asks. "Having William so far away?"

George nods, expression a little distant before he straightens his back.

"Sure is. But the way I see it, you survive a war like that, you gotta live your life the way you want. All there is to it."

Gale sits there, coffee cup almost burning his hands, and listens to the tick of the clock and stares at the photos of George's sons. One dead, one alive. No logic to any of it, he thinks. No reason one should be dead and not the other. But they are. Gale doesn't realize he's speaking until the words have already left his mouth.

"It's not fair that some of us lived while others didn't."

Gale blushes and apologizes immediately. He's normally more careful with his words. He feels too aware of himself right now, of how not even an hour ago he'd come in his best friend's arms and wanted to stay there.

"Maybe," George says. "Maybe it isn't fair. But that's just how it is."

Gale stares into his coffee cup. His reflection is a shadow. But he *is* alive, and that's all there is too it. He's alive, and so is Bucky, and Gale wants to go to him, and so he will. The decision is suddenly that simple. He finishes his coffee and thanks George for the conversation. George tells him to come again sometime and bring Bucky. They'll have to meet his wife, Lottie. Gale promises him that they will.

Bucky's door is shut when Gale gets back. Gale stands outside a moment, then goes back downstairs and showers. When he comes back up, the door is still shut. Gale raises his closed fist to knock. Hesitates.

"Come in already, Buck, I can hear you hovering out there."

Gale swears under his breath. He walks in, wordless. Bucky is watching him from the bed, sunlight spilling over his bare chest, and all the things Gale wants to say are gone from his mouth. He swallows and stops at the edge of the bed. Hands crossed in front him, the corners of his mouth turned down, feeling boyish but brave. Bucky pulls the covers back. Gale crawls in, right on top of him, sinking into Bucky's body while Bucky wraps his arms around him and kisses his temple. Gale seeks out his mouth, afraid that Bucky will turn away from him and sighing when he kisses him back. Bucky's hand cards through Gale's hair.

"You okay?" he asks.

Gale sighs and presses their foreheads together. He's not okay, not really. Better than earlier, and somehow worse than before. He thinks about George telling him in so many words that Gale deserved to live his life any way he wanted. And in that moment, Gale realized he didn't believe he deserved that at all. Bucky's hand drifts to his jaw, so Gale grabs his wrist and kisses his pulse point.

"I'm—I don't know how to do this, Bucky."

"You don't have to know."

His pulse is thrumming under Gale's lips when he kisses it again. He's so alive it makes Gale's heart ache.

"I know. But I *want* to."

Understanding crosses Bucky's eyes. He smiles, probably wider than he means to, or perhaps not. Bucky has always been the type to wear his heart on his sleeve. He kisses Gale still smiling, teeth catching on Gale's lower lip and holding a moment.

"Major, I'd be honored to show you," he says, and takes Gale's chin between his thumb and forefinger before kissing him again, again, again.

He shifts them and kisses his way down Gale's body. Neck, chest, ribs, stomach. Gale forgets a moment that he can touch Bucky, he's allowed. He pushes his fingers through his hair, desperate to feel him. He knows where Bucky is going. Bucky still looks up, seeking permission with his eyes. No one has ever done this for Gale before, and Bucky knows that, because he knows everything about Gale. He probably knows that right now, Gale wants to run away as much as he wants to fold into Bucky's touch. What he doesn't know is that Gale is also thinking about George's dead son. How he's not running anywhere. And that makes Gale wonder what's here that he needs to run away from.

It's just Bucky.

Gale nods, then gasps when Bucky grips the base of his cock and tongues his slit. His legs twitch.

"Oh, okay," he says, and feels Bucky's breath against his cockhead as he laughs.

"It gets even better, doll, trust me," Bucky says.

He sucks the head of Gale's cock into his mouth and Gale drops his head back onto the pillow. Pleasure is already curling in his gut. Bucky takes more of him in his mouth, tongue gliding along the underside of his cock. Gale starts panting and can't stop. He cranes his neck down and watches Bucky slide off his dick a little just to feed more of it in and has to look away. It's the most obscene thing he's ever seen.

"Bucky, I'm not going to last long," he says, no time to be embarrassed about it.

Bucky hums around him, thumbs trailing over the line of Gale's pelvis. Gale tightens his grip on Bucky's hair and makes himself look again. Bucky is almost nosing his pubic hair, Gale nearly stuffed all the way down his throat, eyes fluttered shut. The shame that Gale feels is almost as hot as the pleasure. The two curl together and become equally satisfying.

"Bucky," he says. "Bucky, oh god—"

He comes down his throat and Bucky takes it. Holds Gale in his mouth even when Gale has gone soft and oversensitive and wants to crawl away. He whimpers, thumb caressing Bucky's cheek, and Bucky finally pulls off. He wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand. His smile is

too smug for his own good, but Gale lets him push him flat to the bed and kiss him anyway. He tastes musky.

Gale breaks the kiss.

"Did you call me doll?" he says.

"Yeah," Bucky says, smiling harder. "And ain't you as pretty as one?"

Gale shoves his thigh between Bucky's and rolls them so he's on top, then steals a hand down to where Bucky is hard and leaking. The hesitation only lasts a second, then Gale brings him off in fast, unforgiving strokes, Bucky's hips suspended off the mattress when he comes.

The new shutters go up by the end of September. The shutters were Bucky's project, so Gale has him install them, holds the ladder and doles out praise of how good they look. "You did a good job, Bucky," he says. Even in the cooler air, Bucky is sweaty, hair curling at the base of his neck. It makes Gale want to lick him.

"Your sweet talk's not going to distract me," Bucky says.

Gale smiles up at him. "You're looking real good up there too, Major."

Bucky nearly fumbles the hammer. Gale smiles harder.

The moment they get inside, Bucky crowds Gale against the door and kisses him, filthy and full of intent. Gale can taste sweat on his lips. He licks a path up Bucky's neck to taste more, the way he's been wanting to for the past hour. Bucky groans against him.

"I want you," Bucky says. "Right here."

Gale nods, frantic, Bucky already going for his belt. They've been having sex nearly every day, unable to keep their hands off each other, a string of mutual hand jobs and enthusiastic blowjobs from Bucky. Now that he's opened himself up to the idea of sex like this, Gale feels restless with desire. Some closed off part of himself has burst open and won't stop flowing out. Most days, like today, it's hot and heavy and all desire. Other days, Gale is still riddled with shame

for daring to do a thing like *want*.

He's also terrified to do more than what they've been doing, even though he thinks about getting his mouth on Bucky all the time. About Bucky inside of him. He hasn't said that, but he can tell that Bucky knows. Even with Marge, the two of them had never gone beyond some fumbling in the back of her car, bringing each other off a few times with their hands. They both agreed to wait until marriage. Gale is not a religious man, never has been, but there was relief in that, the idea of waiting.

There's a whole other kind of relief in the way he and Bucky touch each other.

"Come here, sweetheart," Bucky says, taking Gale into his hand. "Let me see how hard you are for me."

Gale bucks into his fist.

Bucky slides pet names into his everyday speech like he's been using them for years with Gale: "Coffee first, sweetheart," and "Come over here, doll," and "Hey, darlin', throw me that book." Gale can't manage to utter even one. They all choke and die on his tongue. Bucky doesn't seem to mind. He smiles even more these days, despite the weather cooling off and the Yankees not making the playoffs.

He asks Gale to teach him how to cook something one night, so Gale shows him how to chop onions and work the oven properly. His heart kicks in his chest, watching Bucky check the oven too many times. Affection almost unbearable to hold onto. Somehow, Bucky's meatloaf comes out subpar anyway despite following the recipe, but Gale eats it happily, the radio crooning in the background. Bucky finally takes a bite and grimaces.

"Jesus, this tastes like an old shoe," he says. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Gale takes another bite.

"I like old shoes."

Bucky watches him like there's nothing else in the world he'd rather look at than Gale.

It makes Gale feel wanted. Makes him feel brave.

In bed later, he pulls Bucky's long johns down.

"You don't have to," Bucky says.

"Can it," Gale says.

He wants to. He's been thinking about this for longer than he cares to voice. Bucky is big. He's bigger than Gale is in almost every way: broader shoulders, thicker thighs, bigger cock. His heart, too, is bigger. It's difficult to admit, but Gale likes that about him. Likes being swept up in Bucky's largeness. He wraps his hand around the base of Bucky's dick and mimics what he's seen Bucky do to him so many times now. Glances up and sees Bucky watching him with his lower lip trembling.

Gale takes him in his mouth. The taste is heady and perfect and Gale moans unbidden and tries to swallow too much at once. Gags. He pulls back. Bucky pets at his hair and cheek.

"Slower," he says. "You got all the time in the world, Buck."

Gale swallows and tries again. He takes half of Bucky into his mouth, lips stretched wide, so full he feels like he could choke and sort of wants to. He drags his tongue along the underside of Bucky's cock.

"Christ," Bucky says. "Yeah, like that, you're a natural."

Gale flushes. A natural cocksucker. He bobs his head, listens for Bucky's noises to know what's working. Bucky has a tight grip on his hair, and the pain feels good. Gale is hard, has been since he first took Bucky in his mouth, and he can't stop himself from rutting against the mattress a little. Bucky must notice. He shifts his hips forward, forcing more of himself down Gale's throat.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, holy shit, Buck, gonna make me come."

Tears flood the corners of Gale's eyes. It feels like too much, and Gale loves that it feels like too much. He lets go, throat relaxing, gagging on Bucky and pulling every sound that he can from him.

"Buck, sweetheart, oh my *god*," Bucky says.

He comes down Gale's throat.

Gale pulls off his dick choking. Bucky wraps him up in his arms before Gale can even try and save face, rubs his back and tells him how good that was, how good *he* was. The taste of him is rich in Gale's mouth, and Gale likes it. He loves it.

Once he finally stops coughing, Bucky goes downstairs to get him a glass of water in just his undershirt. Gale stares at the wall of Bucky's room, where the wallpaper has peeled horribly. He supposes it's not really Bucky's room anymore.

Bucky comes back with the water, and they share the glass until it's empty before getting under the covers again. Gale settles into the crook of Bucky's arm and strokes over his shirt. He stares at the wall. Bucky kisses the top of his head.

"What're you thinking about?"

"Wallpaper," Gale says.

"Now you're really getting me going, talking like that."

Gale thumps him on his chest.

"I'm just wondering if we should ask Croz about the wallpaper, or—or pick it out ourselves."

"Oh," Bucky says.

They go silent. The implication is obvious. If they pick out the wallpaper, it's theirs. It's like they're decorating their home together. Gale keeps forgetting that this isn't their home. Croz hadn't given them a timeframe, but this is temporary. Gale swallows around his tongue, which feels too thick suddenly. Bucky's taste is still fresh in his mouth.

"Are we queer?" he asks.

Bucky's laugh is more of a bark, something nervous and frightened.

"I don't know, Gale," he says. "Probably. We've sure been acting pretty queer with each other. That a problem?"

He's become very still next Gale, as if waiting for him to panic. And even though Gale can't take his eyes away from the peeling wallpaper he still manages to shake his head.

"I saw two men kissing in the park once when I was a boy," he says. "I couldn't bring myself to think there was a thing wrong with it. I still don't."

Once the words leave his mouth, Gale feels exhausted. He's never told that to anyone before. He burrows deeper into Bucky's chest, the broadness of him, and shuts his eyes. Bucky strokes the length of his

jaw quietly.

"I think we should pick out the wallpaper ourselves," he says, the way Gale knew he would.

The way he was hoping he would.

After breakfast the next morning, Gale calls Marge. He's been meaning to. Guilt has been holding him back, and fear. But Gale Cleven is no coward, and he cares for Marge too much. The last time they'd talked was shortly after he and Bucky started sleeping together, and Gale had lied to her by omission and hated himself for it. She doesn't deserve that.

She picks up after a few rings and her voice is sweet and familiar. Gale thinks of all the times they used to run through the prairie together, back when things were simple.

"Marge," he says.

He waits a moment, curled into the couch, phone cord looped around one finger. He breathes.

"Marge, I—I'm not sure I'm the man for you. Not anymore. I'm so sorry. It's not anything you did, do you understand?"

There's a beat. Gale wishes he could see her face, he really does. If Marge wanted to slap him after this, he would let her.

"I had started to suspect," Marge says, voice even. "Is it because of John?"

Gale's hand tightens on the receiver. The breakfast he had feels like it's trying to work its way back up his throat.

"What?" he says.

"Gale Cleven," Marge says. "I've known you since we were children. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"No, of course not."

"I knew," Marge says. "I've *known.* And I knew I might not get you back if I let you go to that house."

Gale's palm is sweating. He switches ears, switches hands, as if the conversation might change by doing so.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I love you, Gale, and I want you to be happy."

"You should hate me," he says.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I don't. Do you hate me?"

Gale's pulse flutters. The prairie flashes back into his mind again, the two of them playing as children. Marge had always been so comfortable around him, so unafraid, and Gale, Gale had never tried to make it with her, was never anything but a perfect gentleman. He'd felt the same around her. Safe.

"There's not a thing on this earth that could make me hate you, Marjorie."

He hears Marge sigh over the line, relieved.

"We can keep up appearances for a while if you want," she says. "But I do have my eye on a boy, mind you."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask. I offered."

Gale laughs. That's the Marge he's always known, strong-willed. He does love her, just not in the way he's supposed to.

"I know. But you've done too much for me already."

"Then this is goodbye for now," Marge says. "Tell John I said hello. And—and then please don't call me for a while, Gale. I'm not mad at you but I need to be alone. I need to have a life without you."

It cuts more than Gale expects to hear that, but he agrees. They hang up and Gale sits there with the phone heavy in his lap. He should feel relieved, and in some ways, he does. In another way, he feels like a huge part of his life has just died. A cord of safety cut.

Bucky comes into the living room a few minutes later with a cup of

coffee for him, looking as nonchalant as he can. Gale sets the phone back on the side table.

"How much of that did you hear?"

"The walls aren't exactly thick, Buck." Bucky hands him the coffee. "You okay?"

His hands are steady as he crouches down and plants his palms on Gale's knees.

"You don't have to worry about me, Bucky." Gale kisses him quickly. "I'll be fine."

He'll feel better if they start working on the fireplace and says as much. They already had a chimney sweep out and keep talking about clearing away all the soot before winter comes, so Gale figures they ought to do that now. It's no use dwelling. Bucky doesn't argue him. They change into old clothes and get to work. By mid-afternoon, the chimney is back in working condition, and they're both streaked black from soot. They take a break to eat Bucky's god awful meatloaf standing over the sink so they don't track soot all over the kitchen table.

The work was good for Gale. He focused only on the task, and not how Marge said she knew. How long had she known? What was it about Gale that tipped her off—the fact that he didn't pressure her into sex? Something about his appearance? That he doesn't follow sports? Do other people know?

Gale blinks back to himself when Bucky snaps his fingers near his face.

"Hey there," Bucky says, a handprint of soot on his face from where Gale had playfully patted his cheek earlier. "You good?"

"Of course," says Gale.

"Okay…because I asked if you wanted to go into town tonight."

Gale blinks again. He didn't even hear him. It's a good idea though. They've been in the house too long and both deserve a night out. Bucky has stopped drinking like he's hoping to drown in whiskey. Gale sets his plate in the sink.

"Town sounds good," he says. "We can find something edible for

dinner too."

Bucky's mouth curls into a smile. Then he cups his hands to his chest and throws his head back.

"Oh, you're breaking my heart, doll, calling me a bad housewife like that."

"Yeah, but I haven't kicked you out of bed yet," Gale says.

They end up at the bar after a country fried steak dinner at the restaurant down the street they like to frequent. Frank, the barman, knows them both by name now, and hands Gale a cold bottle of Coke before reaching for the whiskey.

"You keep an eye on him," Frank says to Gale, motioning to Bucky with his brows.

Gale takes a pull of his Coke. "I always do."

"Offended, Frank," Bucky says. "I'm downright offended."

"You're about to be downright drunk in half an hour," Frank tells him, and slides over a glass of whiskey.

He and Bucky are somehow good friends now, actually. Gale isn't sure how that happened.

Gale and Bucky take their usual table where they can see the door, and it's like nothing has changed. Bucky doesn't touch him any more or less than he did before they started having sex. Gale said nothing about how they should act together in public before they left the house because he wasn't sure what to even say, and because when it comes down to it, he trusts Bucky. He relaxes into himself, the conversation with Marge from that morning so deep in the back of his mind now he's barely aware of it.

Three guys are seated at their table an hour later, yelling about baseball. Bucky's new friends, who are now by extension Gale's new friends, even though their interests are rooted firmly in the upcoming World Series. They find Gale fascinating for *not* caring about baseball.

"So you don't care a lick whether the Cardinals or the Red Sox win?" Charlie asks.

Bucky had introduced them all as "Charlie and The Boys," and fifteen minutes in, Gale still can't get the names of the other two guys. He only knows that they have a pick-up league and are thinking about trying to bum a ride to watch the World Series.

"Not at all," Gale says.

"But who do you *think* will win?" one of The Boys asks.

Gale looks to Bucky, helpless, and Bucky just grins at him.

"Cardinals?" Gale says, which sets off a series of arguments about players being traded, the National League versus the American League.

Gale goes to the bar for another Coke. He comes back and lets himself be politely fascinated by how excited they all are about the World Series, especially Bucky. It's the first championship post-war. Gale can appreciate that, how it feels like things are normal again. Bucky agrees or disagrees with Charlie and The Boys, his hand intermittently squeezing Gale's thigh under the table.

Charlie and The Boys head out after another half hour, but not before promising to meet up again soon. Then they're gone, tripping right out the door. Bucky waves at them, cheeks red from drinking and laughing.

"Holy hell," he says. "This town is full of kooky guys. I think I like it."

Gale watches their shadows outside the bar's windows as they walk down the street.

"Five bucks says they ask you to join their pick-up league in the spring."

"I might," Bucky says, shifting in his seat. "If we're here."

Gale tries to take a sip of his Coke and finds it empty. He feels like Bucky is asking him a question he doesn't have the answer to.

"You could join too," Bucky says, puncturing the silence himself. "I know you played stickball as a kid."

"Until my dad started making bets on the games and got me kicked off

the team." Gale presses the length of his thigh Bucky's briefly. "I left that part out."

He knows Bucky is looking at him, he just doesn't want to look back. It's a poor story and an even poorer memory. Gale isn't sure why he brought it up tonight. His tongue feels sharp and bitter in his mouth.

"Sorry," he says.

"What for?"

Gale looks at Buck to tell him that he's sorry for being miserable company right now, only Bucky is watching him like Gale told him something holy, some coveted secret for him to keep. Gale's heart does a funny little flip in his chest.

"I—"

A glass shatters near the bar. Someone laughs. Gale's whole world narrows down to absolutely nothing. His body numbs, vision tunneling to just Bucky, then barely him. He feels like something bad is happening and knows it isn't but can't shake the feeling. Can't do a damn thing. Bucky's expression drops.

"Buck? What's wrong?"

Gale can't produce language for a moment. Even if he could, he's not sure he'd want to tell. He wants to run and crawl under a house like a sick animal to die.

"Buck," Bucky says again, eyes white with fear.

The words hit Gale in the teeth suddenly.

"I don't know," Gale says. "I don't know. I can't feel my hands."

His voice feels very tight. This hasn't happened in over a month, so Gale doesn't understand why it's happening now.

"I'll drive us home," Bucky says.

"Bucky, you're drunk."

Bucky moves out of his seat anyway. "Just wait here a minute, Buck. That okay? I'll be right back."

Gale nods, he must nod, because Bucky goes to the front of the bar,

comes back, and puts his hand on Gale's knee under the table. The touch feels good. Gale isn't convinced he can move yet otherwise.

Then more time must pass, because George's face comes swimming into view as if he's been at the bar the whole time.

"Gale," he says. "I've got Lottie in the truck with me. We're going to take you boys home now."

Gale moves without speaking or acknowledging, aware in his mind that he'll feel awful about his bad manners later, he just can't do anything else right now. Bucky's got a hand firmly on his lower back. When he stops to pay their tab, Gale stops with him. He's not about to leave Bucky's side. Not for anything. His face must look shattered, because Frank waves them off, says, "Next time you're in you can settle up with me." Gale hears Bucky thank him. Thinks he does, anyway.

George's truck is parked behind theirs in the street. Lottie is in the passenger seat, a thin woman with bright blonde hair and glasses. She looks at the three of them and smiles, then whispers something to George, who seems to agree with her.

Both trucks only seat two people each, so Lottie drives Gale back in their blue pickup while George drives Bucky in his pickup. The familiarity of the truck makes it slightly easier for Gale to breathe, but he wishes he was still next to Bucky. He felt powerless to suggest they squeeze the three of them in one truck. He's silent now, watching the lights of George's truck in front of them.

"Well, it's not how I'd hoped we'd meet, but it's nice to meet you," Lottie says.

"I'm sorry," Gale says.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, dear."

By the time they get to the farmhouse, Gale feels mostly himself again. He can certainly feel his legs again. He thanks Lottie for the ride, and George for helping them out, *again,* embarrassed.

"It's the shell shock," George says, shaking his hand. "I've been there myself. I've seen it. Get inside, son, splash some water on your face."

Gale steps inside, surprised when he realizes Bucky isn't right behind him. He half turns and sees George talking to him, so Gale continues

in alone and heads to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. Gale had told Bucky about George about a week after Bucky had been too drunk to drive home. He's amazed that Bucky remembered at all with how heavily he'd still been drinking, then again, Gale isn't sure Bucky has ever forgotten a thing Gale has told him.

By the time Bucky comes back inside, Gale is already in bed. It's likely only been a handful of minutes, but Gale's sense of time still feels skewed. Bucky pokes his head in the room and says, "Be right up." Returns a few minutes later with minty breath and undresses so he can slide into bed alongside Gale. Bucky grabs hold of him immediately, Gale's head pressed to his chest. Gale realizes he's shaking.

"Bucky—"

"You scared me."

"I'm sorry," Gale says.

"No." Bucky holds onto him tighter. "Don't be sorry, you dummy. I'm telling you because—"

He goes silent. Gale throws an arm across his waist and lets his fingers spider up Bucky's shirt to his bare skin and rest there. Bucky shivers at the contact, not quite shaking anymore. Just thinking. Gale can always tell when he's thinking.

"You keep telling me not to worry about you, but I do," Bucky finally says. "Even George told me to look out for you. Said you were the suffer in silence type. Like I didn't already know."

Gale's first instinct is to argue that, because he doesn't need to be looked after. But the words come to the front of his mind in his mother's voice, telling him that he's the man of the house now since his father can't be, and he's old enough to look after himself. Gale never once questioned if that was true or not. Never thought to. At the prison camp, he didn't complain to anyone, because they needed him, Bucky needed him, and Gale had to be that person. He wanted to be. Only lately he's felt stretched too thin, a sweater that's been washed so often someone could yank the thread and unravel him entirely.

He'd always imagined having children with Marge, was the thing. He would come home, and they would get married, have kids, and settle into a life. That was how it was supposed to be, and sometimes it was the only thing that kept Gale going in the prison camp, the thought of

normalcy. Gale wanted that because he was told to want that. It's strange now to think how that life will never happen. He knows now he never wanted that life to begin with, but losing Marge still feels just like that—loss.

"I feel like I don't which direction I'm going," he says. His voice comes out thinner than he expects.

Bucky tilts his chin up so they can look at each other.

"Christ, Buck, me either," he says. "I've never been so lost in my life. But I'm not mad about being lost with you."

The admission should pull Gale back into that bad place again, only it doesn't. It makes him feel light and understood and something else he can't even name. He closes the distance between them and kisses Bucky softly. They drift off to sleep like that, their bodies wrapped up as one.

He feels awake and alive and himself the next morning. Gale looks out the window at the leaves rolling across the yard and shakes Bucky awake, says, "Come bathe in the creek with me." He fully expects Bucky to say no, because it's nippy out, sun barely breaking the horizon, but Bucky nuzzles his wrist where it's settled on his shoulder and says yes.

They bathe in the creek naked, their clothes piled on the rocks near the shore. The creek is still within the Crosby's land, so no one should stumble across them, but they keep their hands to themselves just in case. The creek is a winding ribbon only twenty feet across, yet deep enough that the water covers Gale's waist. He ducks under briefly, submerged, the shock of the cold water emptying his mind.

"This what you did in Wyoming?" Bucky asks, shivering next to him.

"Sometimes," Gale says. "I liked it. The quiet, how clean everything was. The oil fields made you feel grimy all the time."

Bucky ducks under the water a moment, then returns to the surface and shakes his hair out. Gale watches, unashamed. Watches Bucky's

body, the way it moves, how his shoulders are infinitely broader than his own will ever be. How Bucky's thighs, thicker than his own, cut through the water. Gale's skin goes tight with want.

"I used to run around Manitowoc in the winter with Buck and grab hold of car bumpers so we could slide along the icy roads," Bucky says. "The other Buck."

"He was real?"

"*Yes*," Bucky says, then blushes.

He's got a funny look on his face, mouth pulled into a straight line. Bucky has soft eyes, permanently half-lidded. Gale shifts, naked in the clear water, his own blush blooming on his chest.

"Sometimes I wanted to kiss you so bad I thought I'd die if I didn't," Bucky says.

The enormity of the confession makes Gale want to look away. He doesn't let himself. He's starting to wonder if he hadn't always known that Bucky wanted him in that way, and just shoved it down, the way he did so many other things. But not Bucky. Bucky is the bravest man Gale has ever known.

"Buck, I'm gonna freeze to death if we don't go back inside soon," Bucky says, which is when Gale realizes he hasn't said anything back.

They dry off, dress in their long johns, and run back to the house shivering. Gale stops Bucky at the bottom of the stairs and kisses him.

"I want you to fuck me," he says.

Bucky goes still against him. Gale presses his hand to Bucky's chest, skin cool from the creek water, and feels his heartbeat. Something about that pulls Bucky back into the moment. He takes Gale's face in his hands and kisses him, no longer hesitant. They stumble up the stairs like that, mouths connected, hands pawing at the wall and each other.

Bucky kicks the bedroom door open. Gale follows, drawn to Bucky's mouth, the taste of him something he'll never tire of. Bucky pulls him down onto the bed, Gale's hands bracketing his head.

"Say it again," Bucky says. "Please."

"I want you to fuck me," Gale says. "I want—I want you to make love to me."

"You want me inside you."

"Yes."

Gale leans down and kisses the center of Bucky's chest. Looks up at him through his lashes. Bucky cups his jaw, briefly, then shifts them so Gale is on his back and Bucky starts pulling Gale's underwear down, skin mottled pink from the cold water, from the desire Gale can see in his eyes.

"I'm going to make you feel so good," he says, running his hands up Gale's naked thighs. "I've wanted to have you like this for a long time, Buck."

"Jesus Christ."

Gale rubs a hand over his face and through his damp hair. Bucky is so open, so casual about his desire, but he means it, always means it, so Gale feels a little crazy hearing him talk like this. Bucky laughs and kisses his stomach.

"You didn't forget my name already?" he says, then winks.

Gale inhales to tell him off for being so corny, then loses his breath entirely when Bucky pushes his legs up into the air. Gale knows exactly where he's looking, and it makes him want to close his legs and makes his cock kick against his belly. Bucky's thumbs are drawing little circles on the undersides of his knees. Then he squeezes and says, "Hold your legs up for me." Gale obeys without thinking about it. He doesn't know what's about to happen. In the most logical sense, he understands how two men fuck each other, but he really doesn't *know*.

The drag of Bucky's thumb against his hole makes his entire body jerk against the bed. It's unexpected. Dries his mouth out. Gale looks between his spread legs just in time to see Bucky ducking down, but he's still not prepared for the wet press of Bucky's lips against his hole.

"Bucky…"

Bucky's palm rubs against his thigh.

"It's okay, Buck," he says. "You took care of me, and now I'm taking care of you."

Some of the tension eases out of Gale's body. He didn't even realize he was holding it. Bucky's palm disappears and Gale feels his mouth on him again, then the hot swipe of his tongue. A pause before Bucky's hands spread him open and he licks into him again, tongue just barely penetrating him.

"Oh fuck," Gale says. "Fuck, oh—Bucky—god, Bucky."

"I gotta get you nice and wet for me," Bucky says.

One of his fingers teases along Gale's ass, presses against his hole. It's filthy, and the fact that it's filthy makes Gale's whole body shake and his mind fuzz out. The next time Bucky puts his mouth on him, he jerks his hips up, seeking out more, not yet sure what that more is. And Bucky tongues him open like he's trying to search something out inside of Gale, pull it to the surface.

When he pulls away, Gale says, "No, wait, don't stop, please don't," and isn't even embarrassed by the level of his own want. His hands hurt from how hard he's been gripping his own thighs. Bucky kisses the side of his knee.

"You want me to fuck you, remember?" he says. "Don't move, I'll be right back."

He's downstairs and up again within thirty seconds, holding a can of Crisco. Gale picks up on what's happening quickly. It pulls his stomach tight in a good way. He drops his legs and puts his hand on his cock, stroking lazily. Bucky notices and climbs back over him to kiss him. He tastes like Gale.

"Do you have any idea," he says, but doesn't finish the thought.

He settles back between Gale's legs and this time rests Gale's thighs over his own, leans forward a bit so that Gale is bent at the waist, ass snug in his lap. He coats one of his fingers and slips it between them. Gale is already so wet and relaxed that it slides in halfway with no resistance. The pressure has him moaning, his mind chanting, *do you have any idea?* And god, he didn't. Not for the longest time.

Bucky is so patient and gentle with him that Gale ends up taking four of his fingers. They work up to three, then back down to two, because the stretch is strange at first and burns for a while, but after that Gale feels full, feels desperate. Feels like he could take Bucky's entire hand no problem and says as much.

"I could take more. I could take all of you."

"Christ alive, your *mouth,*" Bucky says. "I never knew you could talk like that."

Gale eyes his cock, neglected and hard against his stomach. He grinds down again on Bucky's fingers.

"Give me your cock," he says.

Bucky looks up at him, something bright and teasing in his eyes. He doesn't stop fingering Gale, bordering now on this side of too much. He keeps brushing against some spot inside of Gale that's making his cock leak all over his stomach. Gale is afraid he might come like this, untouched, heels digging into the mattress.

"Please," Gale says. "Please, Bucky, I need you to fuck me."

Bucky groans and kisses him, finally slips his fingers out.

"Baby, you know I would never say no to you," he says. "Even if you do beg awful pretty."

Gale nips at his lower lip, drinks up Bucky's laugh despite now feeling empty and nervous and ready. Bucky sits back to slick up his cock and Gale sits up on his knees.

"Let me—" He gestures to Bucky's lap with his chin. "Can I—?"

Bucky goes doe-eyed immediately and lets Gale climb into his lap. He hooks his chin over Gale's shoulder and Gale feels his cockhead bump against his hole.

"Hold yourself open for me," he whispers.

Gale shivers and does.

"Yeah, just like that," Bucky says, voice soft yet somehow everywhere.

Then he is inside of him.

That first thrust has them both gasping. Gale lets Bucky work him slowly onto his cock until he's fully seated, thighs trembling from holding up his own weight. Gale feels full up, not the way he did when Bucky had him on his fingers, he feels full in his whole body, like Bucky's cock is now the core of him. Can feel Bucky inside him with every breath he takes, struck with the urge to rise off his cock

and take it in all over again. Bucky is quiet for once, breath coming in fast pants. Gale kisses the side of his neck and feels Bucky grab hold of his hips. He stops holding himself open so he can wrap his arms around Bucky's shoulders.

Gale rolls his hips to test out the feeling of Bucky inside of him. Bucky moves to meet him. That somehow draws Bucky deeper into his body, or feels like it does, and Gale chases the sensation, his hips moving in circles on Bucky's cock. He doesn't understand how it hurts a little and still feels mind-numbingly good.

"God, you're beautiful," Bucky says. "You even know how beautiful you are? You're gorgeous."

"Don't make me blush, talking like that," Gale says.

"But I love making you blush. I want to you see you blush while you ride my cock."

Gale ducks his head, but Bucky catches his chin in his hand. He doesn't kiss him. He just looks, and Gale can't turn away and doesn't want to. The tender bloom of humiliation and affection he feels makes his gut tighten.

"Yeah," Bucky says. "There's that blush."

"Fuck me," Gale says, pushing forward until he's nose-to-nose with Bucky. "Jesus, fuck me, John."

Bucky tilts them so Gale is on his back on the mattress. His cock slips out, but before Gale can even think to complain, Bucky is sliding back inside him roughly, Gale's legs bent up near his ears. It puts an ache in his hips like crazy and Gale doesn't even care because Bucky is fucking into him harder, free hand rubbing all over Gale's chest like he's searching for another way to get inside him.

"You feel so good," he says. "You feel incredible."

He kisses Gale wet and uncoordinated, nearly all tongue. Gale can barely breathe he's so full. Can't stop moaning for more. Bucky's thrusts quicken into tight, grinding movements.

"I'm gonna come," he says, and Gale just nods, Bucky's orgasm his singular focus now.

"Fuck." He bites at Gale's neck and chest. "Fuck, oh fuck. Gonna come

inside you, baby. Gonna fill you up."

"Uh-huh," Gale says, delirious at the prospect, then, "Yeah, please, yeah."

Bucky comes harder than Gale has ever seen him come, Gale's name on his lips. Instead of pulling out, he keeps fucking Gale, one hand cupping the side of his face, the other stroking his cock. Gale tightens up immediately. He hasn't had his cock touched this entire time, and he can feel how wet he is inside now from Bucky's release, Bucky still thrusting into him. The realization that he's about to come is almost devastating, because he doesn't want this to end, but he's desperate for it. Gale finds Bucky's gaze and holds onto that again.

"Bucky," he says, suddenly the only word he knows. "*Bucky*."

His orgasm rips through him. Gale shuts his eyes and sees spots, hears someone screaming and realizes it's him, hears Bucky praising him through it. When he comes back to himself, he realizes he's got Bucky's thumb in his mouth and isn't sure if he pulled it there himself or if Bucky did. Gale lets go of Bucky's thumb and sees a ring of teeth marks around the skin. He doesn't get the chance to ask about it before Bucky collapses on top of him.

He kisses Gale's jaw and chin, panting wetly against him.

"You okay?" he asks.

The real question is obvious in his eyes. He's scared. Scared that Gale is going to freak out again. Leave him. Gale kisses the corner of his lips, then his mouth.

"I'm okay," he says. "I could go for some coffee and some breakfast. But you're cooking."

Bucky smiles. "Wow, I must have really worn you out if you're asking *me* to cook."

Gale flushes. "Don't know what you're talking about."

Which is a bold thing to say when he's got Bucky's come drying on his thighs, but he says it anyway. Bucky stares at him for a moment, then holds Gale down and starts licking him clean between his legs until Gale has to kick him away, oversensitive and nearly hard again.

They start wallpapering the house just as the World Series begins. They come home with two different patterns, as it turns out Gale and Bucky both have strong opinions about wallpaper. The two of them had bickered in the store for half an hour over which would look best in the living room before Bucky caved to the soft green with the geometric red. Both of them agreed on the yellow and blue geometric. "It'll look swell in our bedroom," Bucky said after in the truck. Not his bedroom. Their bedroom.

And their bedroom is where they start, the old wallpaper pried away, the walls stripped clean. Windows open to vent out the smell of the paste as they decorate the walls. The radio is blaring downstairs, and every now and then Bucky ventures out into the hall to get a better listen.

"You think Charlie and The Boys made it to Sportsman's Park?" Gale asks.

"Not a doubt in my mind that they did." Bucky smiles, fingers pressed to the doorframe. "They'll probably hitch to Fenway, too. Kooky guys."

"You probably could've gone with them, if you wanted."

Bucky walks back into the room. Gale is on the step ladder. Bucky stops in front of him and sets his hands on his hips, brows raised.

"If I wanted," he says. "But I didn't."

He steps behind Gale to grab another roll of wallpaper and squeezes his ass as he goes.

"Bucky," Gale says, groin tightening.

Bucky turns to him and bats his lashes. "Yeah, sweetheart?"

Gale flicks paste at him.

He gets him back later. Crawls down Bucky's body in bed and swallows his cock, bobbing his head and letting Bucky's dick bruise the back of his throat. Gale has always had an oral fixation, knew he would've been a smoker if not for all the toothpicks and gum, but now he's found a good use for it. He doesn't pull off, not even when Bucky

is begging, saying, "Buck, sweetheart, please, I want to fuck you." Not until Bucky comes, spent, and Gale kisses him and spits some of his own come back into his mouth. Right there in their bedroom.

The living room takes longer than expected to wallpaper. Some of the old wallpaper sticks to the walls in pieces, and it takes days to scrape it off and strip everything clean. It's the last game of the World Series when they're finishing up. Bucky is all wound up, narrating the game to Gale even though the sportscaster is already doing that over the radio. But his excitement is contagious, always has been. Gale smiles, shakes his head, sat on the floor to unroll another strip of wallpaper. Bucky pastes the wall just as the game crests.

"Oh Jesus," Bucky says. "Oh my god, Buck, they're gonna win. The Cardinals are going to take it."

He walks towards the radio, hand tapping against his trouser leg, and the wallpaper immediately folds back over and covers Gale's head.

"Bucky," he whines.

"Shit." Bucky lifts the wallpaper back up and kisses Gale's forehead, laughing. "Sorry, doll, almost lost you under there. I'm just—"

The sportscaster starts shouting and Bucky hauls Gale upright and kisses him.

"The Cat did it! Harry fucking Brecheen! The Cardinals fucking won, Buck!"

He kisses Gale again, doesn't seem to care that there's paste all over their shirts now. Gale is caught up in his excitement even though the outcome made no difference to him either way.

"You make a bet on them?" he asks.

Bucky's fingers stroke the soft inner skin of his elbows. There's cheering coming through the radio speakers. It reminds Gale of when the war ended.

"Bet you'd give me a kiss," Bucky says.

"Lousy bet, Egan. I'm already a sure thing."

Bucky blushes, a rare thing to see. Gale traces a finger down the length of Bucky's nose, then over the rosiness that's risen to his cheeks.

The radio is cheering and cheering.

They finish wallpapering and collapse on the couch together, all the furniture still pushed into the center of the room. Gale is sweaty and tired but struck with a sense of ease he hasn't felt in so long he can't pinpoint the last time he held the feeling. Bucky has his head in his lap, Gale toying with his hair. The living room looks and feels entirely different than it did from summer. Feels like a home.

"I'll go with you to a game sometime," he says.

"A ball game?" Bucky cranes his neck up.

"Yes," Gale says, laughing. "A ball game. You can buy me a hotdog."

Then they're both laughing, and Gale doesn't know why, but there's no reason to stop, so they don't.

Some days he wakes up and still wants to sink into the earth. Some days Bucky does too. Some days Bucky is irritable and drinks behind Gale's back, then comes crawling to him, miserable, and asks Gale to tell him about the constellations again. Gale scoops him into his arms and does.

Marge still hasn't called. The longer Gale goes without hearing from her, the easier it is to let that part of his life live in memory. When he jerks awake, it's Bucky who holds him, tells him he's okay now. And that gets easier to believe too.

Bucky brings home a mantel clock and they set it up over the fireplace. Then Gale finds a plush green chair for the living room and brings that home. Bucky calls it his smoking chair, even though Gale won't let him smoke in it. It's actually Bucky who has an eye for décor. He manages to find things that match the wallpaper and the kitchen tiles. Things that look like they belong.

They turn Gale's old room into an office, or rather, they find a desk on the side of the road and haul it into the truck, then stick it in Gale's old room and put one of the kitchen chairs up there. Gale's bed is still set up, in case someone comes by and they need to pretend they're just

buddies living together. Sometimes one of them will go in there when they're feeling sour and want time alone. But the first thing Bucky does with the desk is fuck Gale over it, one hand caught up in his hair, the other kneading his ass.

"Your ass is just the sweetest thing, honest to god," he says, then spanks Gale hard, and it shocks a yell from Gale, has him scrabbling over the lacquer of the wood.

"Do that again," he says

Bucky does, and Gale comes hard, head thrown back.

When the milkman arrives the next morning, Gale meets him right at the door, whistling.

George and Lottie invite them to their farm for Thanksgiving. It's a welcome invitation, since Gale has no one to go home to and when he'd suggested Bucky go visit his folks, Bucky blew the idea off, said it was too far to travel.

"We'll bring a pie," Bucky says into the receiver.

Gale just looks at him, the two of them pressed together by the telephone, and Bucky shrugs, mouths 'what?', perfectly innocent.

They show up to George and Lottie's with a pumpkin pie a week later. Gale also sticks carrot in his pocket. Bucky has never been to their farm before, but Gale warned him on the drive over: it's full of cows, and their sons also served in the war. The youngest didn't make it. Bucky takes that information in silently, the pie warm in his lap. This is their first Thanksgiving together. Gale lets the word *together* roll around in his mind. He and Bucky haven't talked about it, but he supposes they're together. They live in the same house, sleep in the same bed. He's pretty sure Bucky isn't sleeping with anyone else, so Gale can't figure why Bucky hasn't asked him about it himself.

Gale tucks those thoughts away as he pulls the carrot out of his pocket and Bucky looks at him like he's gone mental.

"What the hell are you doing carrying a carrot around in your pocket for?"

"Saying hello to my best girl," he says.

He walks Bucky to Tiny's stall and clicks his tongue twice. Sure enough, she trots over, eyes on the carrot. Gale breaks it in half and hands one half to Bucky, who balances the pie in his left arm. Tiny eats the carrot from Gale's palm, her smell oaty and familiar.

"You look good like that, you know," Bucky says, holding his half of the carrot out for Tiny.

"What do you mean?"

"Taking care of things." Bucky makes a face at the slobber left on his palm and wipes it on his coat. "You've always been good at that. Taking care of stuff. Good with animals."

Gale watches Tiny pick at the grass and search for more food. That doesn't feel true. It's difficult to voice why. To Gale, Bucky is and always has been the one taking care of him. He's never thought that kind of thing could go both ways before.

"Probably why you're so good with me," Bucky says, tongue peeking through his lips.

"You said it, not me," Gale says, and presses his cold nose to Bucky's shoulder briefly. "Come on. We'll be late."

George and Lottie usher them inside before they even finish knocking on the door. The house smells delicious, like turkey and stuffing and candied yams and cooked apples.

"Oh, look at this," Lottie says, clearly charmed. "You didn't really have to bring a pie. Now, who baked this?"

"We both did," Bucky says.

He hangs up his coat and smiles sweetly at Gale, who's doing his best to not purse his lips. Bucky had been determined to bake the first pie and it somehow came out looking and smelling like a brick. He *watched* Gale bake the second, and kept encouraging him to go off recipe by adding more cinnamon, or maybe a bay leaf, and hey Buck, what the hell is a bay leaf anyway? (Truthfully, Gale isn't sure what a bay leaf is.)

Lottie takes the pie and brings it to the kitchen while George takes them to the dining room. The antique wooden table is decorated in lace doilies and candles, the silverware wrapped up nice and neat. Gale and Bucky would never think to set a table this way. They sit side by side, and Bucky briefly puts his hand on Gale's thigh before snatching it back.

"She really went all out this year," George says. "First Thanksgiving with no war on our heels. Can't blame her."

"No, sir, you really can't," Bucky says.

Gale watches him look around and sees the moment he notices the photos of William and Benjamin. He clears his throat and unrolls his napkin. George offers Bucky a drink and to Gale's surprise, Bucky declines.

"I'll take whatever Buck is having. I'm trying to cut back on the sauce."

Lottie comes back in with the first round of food as he says this and starts laughing. She puts green beans slathered in butter on the table, hot rolls from the oven, and the candied yams.

"So you're Bucky, and you're Buck?" she asks.

"There was no stopping him," Gale says. "Apparently I look like a Buck."

"Charming," Lottie says, genuinely charmed, and says it again as she goes back to the kitchen.

The turkey she brings out is big enough to feed at least eight people, or maybe Gale really hasn't seen a whole turkey in that long. Lottie wheels it in on a serving table, and George claps, says, "An absolute feast, my love," before kissing her cheek. It makes Gale smile, and it makes his hand twitch under the table. He wants to touch Bucky in the same way and knows that he can't. He brushes his fingers over Bucky's leg as he reaches for another bread roll, neither of them pausing the conversation. Bucky's foot presses to his briefly.

After three helpings, they move to coffee and dessert, Lottie scooping fresh whipped cream onto the pies.

"It really is so nice to have you boys here," she says. "Our Willie is with his wife's family in Chicago, and we won't see him until Christmas."

"Well, we appreciate you having us," Gale says.

George shoves a bite of pumpkin pie into his mouth and chews slowly.

"You boys really made this pie? It's delicious."

"There was, uh…" Gale clears his throat. "There was a time when food was very scarce for the both of us. Feels nice to know I can make anything if I want to."

He looks at Bucky, aware of what he's just revealed. Even Gale wasn't sure of why he took to cooking so quickly for a while. But there's a safety in it he is desperate to keep. Bucky watches him back for perhaps a moment too long, his hand curled into a light fist on the table as if to stop himself from reaching out.

"Pumpkin was Ben's favorite flavor of pie," Lottie says. "I always said that was the first thing I was going to make for him when he got home —"

Her next inhalation is sharp and watery. She pulls her glasses off and wipes at her eyes, hands trembling.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm sorry."

She gets up, chair scraping, and heads into the kitchen. George stays seated, his gaze a hard thing on his plate. Gale follows Lottie into the kitchen. She's standing by a pile of pots and pans, the sink already full. Gale makes his footsteps purposefully loud so she hears him coming, but she still doesn't turn. He doesn't think of the mothers of the men in his own squadron. How this is their evening as well. How he failed them.

"Can I help with anything?" he asks.

Lottie turns, smile wavering, and shakes her head.

"My Ben was such a helper." She grabs a kitchen towel and dabs her eyes. "Loved his father but hated farm life. Never had the stomach for killing cattle."

She looks at Gale again, briefly.

"He was always a sensitive boy."

Gale swallows. He feels exposed, then remembers Lottie isn't talking about him, she's talking about her son, who is suddenly so clear to

Gale he can feel the grip of the yoke in his hands, taste the air in his oxygen mask. When Lottie looks at him again, her eyes have become sharp points under the kitchen lights.

"Why are you here?"

Gale doesn't understand for a moment. Lottie darts forward and hits him with the kitchen towel, nothing more than a brush again his shirt, and Gale lets her.

"Why are you here and not my Ben?" she says. "Why? Why!"

Bucky enters the kitchen at the noise and pulls Gale back from Lottie's grief, and Lottie screams at him to get out, for both of them to get out. George shoves past the two of them and collects Lottie in his arms, hushing her.

"Calm down now. Remember what the doctor said. Where are your pills?"

"Fuck my pills, I don't want them, I want Ben," Lottie says, but she lets George lead her out.

Gale and Bucky stay frozen in the kitchen, listen as Lottie sobs upstairs that she misses her boy, until her weeping goes silent. George returns to them like nothing has happened, a soldier through and through.

"It's probably best I send you boys off for the night," he says. "I don't think Lottie is up for entertaining anymore."

Bucky is staring into the far corner of the kitchen. His body feels distant, even though he's still got his hand on Gale's arm from when he pulled him back. He nods all at once, like it's no big deal at all. Happens all the time.

George has them take some food home and sends them off with apologies. Bucky drives them back. The two of them are silent, but Gale can't stop repeating Lottie's words in his head. Bucky shuts the truck off and says, "Well, that was a hell of a night." Like it's all some kind of joke. Gale shoves the truck door open.

"Bucky, I hate when you do this."

Then he goes inside, which he knows is cruel of him, it's just that if he stays out here any longer, he feels like the truck might collapse in on him, or he might say something terrible.

"What?" Bucky says, following him in, leftovers dropped on the table.

"Act like nothing happened to us."

Bucky's mouth opens, nothing following. He takes the leftovers to the fridge and shuts the door too hard, then comes back into the living room and turns the radio on. He fiddles with the dial for a bit, mutters that there's nothing good playing, then shuts the radio off all together.

"What's talking about it going to do?" he says. "And do you really even want to? *You,* Gale Cleven? King of burying his feelings?"

Gale ignores the jab. Bucky is still stood by the radio, his body this living block of grief and frustration. Gale hates feeling far away from him. It reminds him of the prison camp, when Bucky walked in with his eye nearly swollen shut, and Gale has never known why. When Bucky would look at the barbed wire fence like he was truly thinking about making a run for it despite knowing he'd die. Despite knowing Gale would lose him.

"Maybe we ought to," Gale says.

Bucky shakes his head, hand tapping the radio dial. "Just let it go, Buck."

Gale inhales. He can't, is the thing. Because he's starting to feel like if he doesn't talk about it, he'll never stop dreaming about falling, never stop hearing glass break and thinking it's a bullet shattering the window of his plane.

"You want to just let it eat you?"

Bucky turns to him. His face looks twisted up and cruel and strange in the dull lighting.

"What do you want me to say, Buck? That I played dead while the guy next to me got beat to death with a shovel? That I still remember what it felt like when his brains hit my face?"

"Yes," Gale says, because he does want that. He wants to help Bucky

hold that.

Bucky's laugh is stuck somewhere in his throat, unkind and hurt. His head bobs, hands planted on his hips. He wants to bite. He wants to bark. Gale will let him.

"Okay," he says. "Okay. You want me to tell you about how I was ready to die in that fucking camp? I would've made a run for it with you. I would've happily died if it was you in the dirt next to me."

Gale grabs him by the front of his coat and hauls him forward. Their bodies crash together, and it hurts, and Gale wants it to. Gale's close enough to kiss him, but he won't yet. He just wants Bucky to look at him, see him.

"I know," he says. "I *know*."

Bucky stays tight and aggravated in his arms for another few seconds, chest pressed tight to Gale's, then he crumbles. It's like his body stops trying to work at all and he collapses into Gale. He starts crying.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Jesus, Buck, I'm sorry."

His face is tucked into Gale's collarbone, hands clutching Gale's coat.

"I just want to forget," he says. "I just want to forget, and I can't. Even when I drink, I can't forget. I don't even want to see my parents again, because they'll look at me and know and I can't. I can't."

"It's okay. Bucky, look at me. It's okay."

Gale lifts Bucky's face tenderly to his own and kisses him. Bucky's lips are wet from crying. Gale licks the salt up. It breaks Gale in two to see him like this, genuinely makes him ache inside. Scares him how badly he wants to take the hurt from Bucky entirely. Not just help him hold it but take it away forever. They collapse onto the floor together and Bucky doesn't stop crying. It sounds ripped right out of his chest. Gale holds him through it all, stroking his back, wiping at his tears. He ignores the ache in his legs.

Then Bucky pulls back and wipes at his eyes, the tears finished all at once.

"Now you, huh?" he says. "Tell me your secrets."

Gale doesn't want to tell him anymore. He's never seen Bucky fall

apart like this before. He wants to help Bucky forget. But Bucky kisses him and says, "Tell me, baby, it's okay," and the words leave Gale's mouth without his permission.

"I wanted to stay with you," he says. "I wanted to—if you hadn't made it out—"

"Shh," Bucky says, like that's all he needed. "I made it out. I'm here."

He doesn't let Gale say anything else and Gale is glad for it. He isn't sure he could manage it.

"We made it out," Bucky says, then says it again, and again, and again, and again, until they're the only words either of them remembers from that night.

They get their first snowfall in the beginning of December, nothing like when they were in the prison camp. Gale wakes up warm and wrapped up in Bucky's arms. Even with the curtains drawn, he can tell something is different out. He tries to get out of bed and Bucky tightens his arms around him, stubborn.

"Let me up," he says, rubbing Bucky's forearms and laughing. "I think it snowed."

"Who cares. Stay in bed with me, I like you in bed with me."

It softens Gale immediately and he quiets down in Bucky's arms again to watch him in the soft light. Bucky still has his eyes closed, full lips parted from sleep. He snores something awful most of the time, but Gale finds it oddly charming. After a few minutes, Bucky opens his eyes. Gale smiles, caught, and kisses him.

"Alright, fine," Bucky says.

He trails Gale into the backyard, and they kick around in the snow. It's far too powdery to build a snowman, or make a proper snowball, but Bucky molds one into his hands anyway and lobs it at Gale when he thinks he's not looking. Gale dodges easily. The sun is already out again, warming the land, so the snow will likely melt by

midafternoon, but it's theirs, Gale thinks. He makes his own crude snowball and throws it at Bucky, who takes it right in the chest just so he can tackle Gale head on. They wrestle on the ground, boots slipping all over the snow, until their clothes are soaked through.

They head inside and hang their wet clothes on the furnace to dry, then Gale starts a fire. The house smells like coffee and woodsmoke before long. Gale whips up some flapjacks while Bucky showers. They eat together by the fire, Bucky watching Gale with a funny look on his face. Gale squints.

"What?"

"What?" Bucky says.

"You look like you're planning something ill-advised."

Bucky pauses with a section of flapjack at his lips. "When have I ever planned anything ill-advised?"

Gale opens his mouth to list off every single time, chronologically, when Bucky shoves his flapjack lovingly into his mouth instead.

"There." Bucky pulls his fork back slowly, the tines pressing over Gale's tongue and lips. "You looked hungry."

Gale chews and swallows, heart caught in his throat.

Bucky shrugs his coat on after breakfast and grabs the truck keys. Gale watches him, stoking the fire. Bucky taps his thumb against the keys, once, twice, then tucks them into his palm.

"I'm running to the bank, you need anything?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Alright then, dollface, see you later."

Gale watches the shut door, blinking. *Dollface.* That's a new one. He stands from the floor and goes to finish up the dishes but sees that Bucky has already taken care of that, so Gale makes more coffee and stares out the window. The snow is already starting to melt.

Bucky is back twenty minutes later, surprisingly quick for a bank trip. Gale is barely dressed from his shower when he hears him come in. He patters downstairs, a greeting on his lips, then freezes at the bottom of the stairs.

Bucky is standing in the living room holding a dozen red roses.

He looks so stupidly handsome standing there that for a moment Gale doesn't think the roses could possibly be for him. Then Bucky says, "Aw, Buck, you didn't think I'd forgotten, did you? You getting me demoted with Harding? *Don't got to send me any flowers,* you said. Like I was going to listen. It's not the actual anniversary, but, no time like the present."

Gale still hasn't moved. He feels absolutely struck dumb by the enormity of the gesture, by Bucky *remembering.* His heart is so full up he wonders if he'll burst if he moves. Everything he's felt over the last four months slams into his brain with such clarity he nearly passes out. Bucky takes a step towards him.

"Buck, you okay? This feels like my least ill-advised—"

"I love you," Gale says.

Bucky's mouth drops open. He lets the flowers fall to the coffee table and crushes Gale against the wall and kisses him.

"*Buck*," he says, then kisses him again.

Each time he pulls back to say something, he shakes his head and kisses Gale instead. Gale is poleaxed by his own words. He's never said *I love you* and meant it that way before. It just seemed like the only thing to say, so he said it.

By the time they get upstairs, their clothes are in piles all over the stairs and Gale is trying to hop out of his underwear before Bucky bodies him onto the bed. He barely manages to get them off, laughing into the kiss and catching Bucky's lip in his teeth. Bucky nips him back, then sits up, knees hugging Gale's waist.

"I love you too, by the way," he says. "Feels like there ought to be another word for how much I fucking love you."

Gale draws his hands up Bucky's chest, thumbs rubbing over his nipples, palm pressed to his heart, and says, "I know."

Bucky fucks him with Gale's legs up over his head. It's deep and slow because there's no other way either of them wants it to go. Gale holds the eye contact as long as he can, fingers caught up in Bucky's sweaty hair. He lets Bucky press his body into the bed and hold him down because it feels good, good to be held, good to know that Bucky has

him in every single way. They've both taken turns having each other like this, but Gale isn't ashamed to admit that he loves being fucked more than fucking. Bucky kisses the bone of his ankle and snaps his hips.

"Say it again."

"I love you," Gale says. "Can't believe you didn't say it first."

Bucky presses his nose to Gale's. "Didn't want to scare you off."

Gale arches into him, trying to follow the thread of the conversation, but Bucky is grinding against that spot inside him that makes Gale go stupid.

"We live together," he says, then, "God, oh god. Feels good."

"Yeah. We do." Bucky is mouthing at his jaw now. "We're together."

The next thrust is so deep, Gale can only manage an "Uh-huh."

"You're my fella, Buck. My guy."

Gale nods, grabs at Bucky's shoulders and pulls like he can force him deeper. He can tell that Bucky is going to come soon, because his thrusts are getting tighter and his mouth is trembling.

"And I'm your man," Bucky says. "I love you, fuck, *I love you, IloveyouIloveyou,* want to tell the whole goddamn world—"

Bucky reaches down and pulls out suddenly, Gale gasping at the emptiness, before Bucky sits up further and jerks himself once, twice, and comes all over Gale's face. Gale shuts his eyes and opens his mouth for it, not thinking, just wanting. Some lands in his waiting mouth, but most hits his face, warm, paints his cheeks and nose and eyelashes. He feels Bucky's thumbs wipe at his lashes, then Gale opens his eyes. Bucky is smiling down at him, his eyes crescent moons.

"Marking your territory?" Gale asks.

"Mmm," Bucky says.

He spreads his come over Gale's face, mesmerized, his expression hinging on worship. Gale lets him, still bent in half. Bucky's fingers rub over his lips, then he collects some of his own come up with his first two fingers. Reaches down to where Gale is still wet and open and presses those two fingers back inside of him. Gale melts for it,

cock kicking against his stomach.

"Ah, *fuck*."

"Go on," Bucky says. "Let me see you make a mess, sweetheart."

He crooks his fingers, grinding on that spot again, Gale letting out a series of "*ah, ah, ah*" sounds. Once Bucky touches his cock, it's over. Gale comes, spilling across both of their stomachs, Bucky pressed close like he wants to feel marked as well.

They shower together after. It's an excess of water, but Gale hardly thinks about that when he kisses Bucky under the spray of the showerhead, their bodies slippery and warm. He thinks maybe they deserve this. After, Gale puts the roses in water and sets them on the kitchen table. He can't stop brushing his thumb over the satiny petals. Bucky presses a hand to the small of his back and kisses his wet hair.

"Did you really think you'd scare me off?" Gale asks. "If you told me that you loved me?"

Bucky squeezes his shoulder.

"Hey, no." He touches the edge of a rose petal, finger brushing Gale's. "I just know you, that's all. You need time to work up to stuff. Christ, though, I would've brought you flowers months ago if I knew that's all it would take to get you to confess your true feelings for me."

"Alright," Gale says, face flushing.

Bucky cups his hands together, voice deepening. "Oh Bucky, I love you so dearly, Bucky."

Gale walks out of the kitchen.

"Bucky, I ache for you, baby—"

He grabs the deck of cards off the coffee table and lobs them at Bucky's face, misses egregiously. Wasn't trying to hit him in the first place, anyway.

The house smells like pine and nutmeg. Gale stares at the plate on the kitchen table.

"Bucky," he says. "Did you eat the heads off all these gingerbread men?"

Bucky pops into the kitchen.

"Yeah, they were looking at me funny." He takes Gale's hand in his before he can respond and tugs him into the living room. "Come on, I want you to open your present."

Gale shoves a headless gingerbread man into his mouth and follows. There's a Christmas tree in the living room they've decorated with gold tinsel, a little silver star on top. A few weeks before Christmas, they'd driven out into the wilderness and chopped the tree down themselves, hauled it back, then realized they didn't know how to decorate a Christmas tree. It looks a little ramshackle, but it's theirs.

The fire is crackling, and the radio is playing Christmas carols. Bucky instructs Gale to sit in the smoking chair and grabs his present from underneath the tree, something large and beautifully wrapped. He sets it at Gale's feet, smiling.

"You're supposed to open presents on Christmas Day," Gale says.

"It's almost ten o'clock, it basically is." Bucky nudges the present forward. "Trust me, Buck. Open it."

Gale pulls the bow off and sticks it to Bucky's sweater, then tears into the wrapping. His breath catches when the box is revealed, fingers stilling overtop like it's not his, like he can't even touch the thing.

"Bucky."

"It's a telescope." Bucky taps his right foot on the floor twice. "There's, uh, refractors or something. So you can get a real good look at the stars at night."

Once, at the prison camp, Gale had whittled down a piece of wood until it resembled an airplane and given it to Bucky as a Christmas present, who started laughing. And Gale didn't understand why, until Bucky pulled out a drawing he'd asked Alexander to make—also a plane. They'd fallen into each other laughing, bug-infested and miserable, their stomachs eating themselves. Gale didn't think they were going to live to see another Christmas.

"This is too much," Gale says now. "Bucky, this is too expensive, I can't —I can't—"

"Whoa, hey." Bucky shoves the box out of the way and climbs into Gale's lap. "Yes, you can. It wasn't too expensive. Swear it wasn't."

Gale's eyes are stinging. He feels ridiculously close to crying, has to blink several times to stop himself, Bucky petting at his cheeks anyway.

"I love it," he says, voice choked.

Bucky kisses him and climbs off his lap.

"We can set it up now, if you want."

Gale wipes at his eyes. "No, you open your gift. Go on."

They switch seats so Bucky can get in the smoking chair and Gale hauls over Bucky's present. Bucky takes the bow off and sticks it next to the other one, then rips the wrapping off.

"Oh, Jesus, Gale," he says, and stands up.

Gale got him a record player. There's a vinyl with it as well, Benny Goodman. Before Gale can ask him if he likes it, Bucky kisses both of his cheeks and starts looking for a place to set the record player. He nearly knocks over the phone trying to set the thing up, then asks Gale to turn the radio off. There's the crackle of the needle hitting the vinyl. Music floats through the speakers. Bucky shuts his eyes, lips between his teeth, then sidles over to Gale in time with the music, intentions clear.

"Oh, Bucky, no," Gale says.

"Too late, it's happening. We're dancing."

Bucky takes Gale's hands and sets one on his shoulder, holds the other in his own. His free hand comes to rest at Gale's waist and moves them to the sound of the orchestra, then Helen Ward's vocals warbling around them. Gale follows helplessly, convinced he's going to crush Bucky's feet.

"'Cause it's been so long, since I held you tight, when we said goodnight," Bucky sings, drowning out the vocals. "It's been so long, honey, can't you see, what you've done to me?"

He goes for a spin and Gale panics, nearly topples over the coffee table, but somehow manages to find his way back into Bucky's arms.

"Alright, alright," he says. He kisses Bucky and rests his head on his shoulder. "Keep me in one place if we're doing this."

Mercifully, Bucky does. They sway to the rest of the song, until the needle crackles again, then stay that way a moment longer before moving to the couch, bodies warm against one another.

"Did you have any good Christmases as a kid?" Bucky asks.

His voice is soft over the music. He's only asked Gale about his childhood a few times, asked Gale once if his father was a mean drunk, and Gale said that he wasn't, which was the truth. He was a happy drunk, which made it harder to hate him. He'd tanned Gale's hide a few times the way all fathers do, but his vice was the bottle and gambling. Sometimes Gale wished he were a mean drunk, if only it meant he'd pay attention to him more.

"Sure, some. I remember one time I got a bag of marbles."

Bucky hums, then takes Gale's palm and presses it to his own. Their hands are almost the same size, Bucky's fingers slightly thicker, the veins on the back of his hands more pronounced. Gale slides his fingers between Bucky's own and feels at the rough skin there.

"I gave them away," Gale says. "This kid—can't remember his name now, but he was a few years younger than me—he'd lost all his in a game. Was walking down the street crying and I felt so bad. Figured he needed them more than I did."

He feels, more than hears it, when Bucky laughs.

"Of course you did. Heart of gold even then." Bucky squeezes Gale's hand. "I got a pedal car one year. I wouldn't have given that thing away for nothin'."

Gale imagines Bucky riding around in his pedal car, all knees, very likely a terror and somehow still sporting a mustache. He bites his lip to stop from laughing.

"You think we would've gotten along as kids?" he asks.

"Baby, I would've been chasing you around town in that pedal car," Bucky says.

The laugh Gale was holding back bubbles up out of his throat so fast he starts choking. Bucky pulls him back onto his lap and Gale keeps laughing, even though it hurts a little. He rests his head against Bucky's lap and looks up at him, the shine in his eyes.

"Yack it up," Bucky says. "You just wait until next Christmas. I'll get a pedal car and chase you through the yard."

"Next Christmas, huh?" Gale says.

Bucky pushes the hair from Gale's face, eyes glowing in the firelight, and nods.

"Next Christmas," he says, like it's a sure thing.

Gale makes bacon and eggs for breakfast the next morning and piles them on plates along with the rest of the headless gingerbread men. He and Bucky call up George and Lottie to wish them a Merry Christmas. They speak to their son William briefly, who sounds a lot like George. Then they call Croz.

"Oh geez, am I happy to hear from you two," he says. "How are you? How's the house?"

"Still standing, believe it or not," Bucky says. "How's your little boy?"

"Walking already," Croz tells them. "It's incredible. He's incredible. I'm sorry I haven't been around to see the place—just been so busy."

Bucky and Gale exchange a look.

"You take care of your family," Gale says. "Don't worry about us."

Bucky calls his folks after to chat with them, and Gale fiddles with his telescope. He thinks he wants to set it up in the bedroom for now, so he can look out at the stars no matter the weather, secluded with Bucky. He sips his second cup of coffee while Bucky laughs over the phone, then calls back to Gale and says that his folks say hello. Gale smiles and goes to the receiver briefly to wish them well.

He's sat on the floor reading the instructions for his telescope still

when Bucky hangs up with his folks. The telephone rings again immediately after. Bucky picks up.

"Buck," he says. "It's for you."

Bucky holds the phone out, expression soft. Gale stands and takes the phone. Bucky stays close to him. He understands why the second he says hello.

"Hi, Gale," Marge says. "Merry Christmas."

Gale's heart leaps into his throat.

"Marge," he says, then remembers his manners. "Merry Christmas. Are you in Kansas with your folks?"

He looks to Bucky, aware of his bewildered, wounded expression. Bucky shrugs, urges him on with a nod of his chin.

"I am," Marge says. "We haven't talked in a while. I wanted to thank you for that."

Gale nods, even though she can't see him. It's a habit he's never been able to break.

"What did John get you for Christmas?" she asks.

"Um, a telescope."

"He knows you well," Marge says.

Gale's whole body warms. He looks to Bucky, still close to him, still watching.

"Yeah, he—he really does."

She asks about the house. Gale tells her that the chimney is working again, and they've wallpapered, gotten some new furniture. They want to redo the barn before the springtime. She sounds genuinely delighted to hear how everything is coming along.

"I would visit someday, you know," she says. "If you're both okay with that."

"Of course we are," Gale says, then bites his lip and looks at Bucky, who leans into the receiver and says, "We would love that, Marge."

They talk for a few more minutes about Marge staying in Kansas before hanging up. Gale feels like he's floating. He stares at the phone, unsure if he'd believe that the conversation really happened if Bucky wasn't right next to him. Marge knowing had been one thing, but Marge saying what she said, asking to visit, it goes against everything he's understood about himself, about being queer. A fear he didn't know he was holding onto loosens and dies.

"Hey," Bucky says. "Are you—"

Gale kisses him. He tastes like ginger. Like Bucky.

"I love you," Gale says. "And I think we should board horses after we fix up the barn."

"We should—" Bucky furrows his brow, then smiles. "We should."

He helps Gale move the telescope. They set it up in their bedroom.

Winter stays mild, compared to how bad it could be. Gale and Bucky join Charlie and The Boys to sled in the park after the new year, rushing down the hill one by one and sometimes side by side. Gale hasn't been sledding since he was a boy. He'd forgotten the simple joy in it, nothing at all like flying and somehow exactly what he's been looking for. To move and not think.

He and Bucky don't have a sled between them, but Charlie and The Boys have three, so they take turns. Gale watches Bucky slide down the hill, his smile so huge Gale can see it from the top of the hill. He walks back up with his hat askew, puffing out cold air.

"Buck, you should ride with Bucky," one of The Boys says. Gale still doesn't know his name. "It'll be a laugh."

Gale doesn't even bother to pretend to be put out by the idea. He rolls his eyes for show, then climbs on the sled behind Bucky and brackets his body with his thighs. Gives him a little squeeze.

"They're gonna go slower," Charlie says.

"Nu-uh," another one of The Boys says. "Faster. It's physics. Geometry.

One of those science-math things."

"Well, we're about to find out," Bucky says. "Give us a push, Charlie."

Gale has no idea if they go faster or slower and doesn't care. He presses his nose to the back of Bucky's coat briefly, the two of them zipping down the hill. They hit the snowbank and topple over it, sled rocketing up into the air. Gale lands half on Bucky and half in the snow. He doesn't move for a moment, cold be damned, then rolls over. Bucky is smiling at him, eyes crinkling, then stands and reaches his hand out. Gale grabs hold and lets himself be pulled to his feet.

"Faster or slower?" Charlie yells from the top of the hill.

"We'll have to go again and see," Bucky yells back.

He winks at Gale so fast that Gale almost doesn't catch it.

They start clearing out the barn and fixing up the horse stalls. Bucky doesn't know a thing about horses, which is fine. He follows Gale's lead, asks what a salt lick is, and changes out the rusty hinges. Gale sweeps out the cobwebs and lets the barn cat stay lurking in the rafters. He knew a lot of people in Wyoming who would board horses for folks. It's good money. He doesn't let himself think about how this isn't his house, his barn, his land. None of that feels true anymore. Everything about this place feels like home.

He and Bucky visit with George and Lottie on occasion, and Lottie cooks them wildly delicious meals. Some days, Lottie is in bed and just can't get up. Gale goes to see George on his own sometimes, the two of them sat with cups of coffee, not a thing said between them. He knows it's harder for Bucky. Things have been better for him since Thanksgiving, but on New Year's Eve he'd buried his face in Gale's sweater and cried again.

"I still want to forget," he'd said, the only thing he'd said, and Gale didn't have the heart to tell him what they both already knew: that they're never going to forget.

Gale wakes from a bad dream one night and uncaps the telescope. He

watches Venus, a crescent of rusty yellow, standing stark naked in the bedroom. Bucky shifts on the bed, waking, then comes over and wraps his arms around Gale's waist. He lays his head on Gale's back.

"What're you looking at it?"

His voice is rough from sleep, and it makes Gale want to crawl back into bed and tuck him in his arms.

"Venus. Want to see?"

He feels Bucky shake his head. Gale turns himself in Bucky's hold and presses his face into the place where his neck meets his shoulder.

"Saw the moon too," he says.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Still made of cheese."

"I love you," Bucky says, and pulls him down onto the bed like he's going to fuse their bodies together. "God, I love you."

Artie Shaw is spinning on the record player and the house smells like coffee and flapjacks. It's become something of a Sunday morning routine for them. Gale sits in Bucky's lap at the kitchen table and reads the newspaper. Pretends not to notice Bucky's hand slowly climbing higher up his thigh.

"The weather report particularly interesting today?" Bucky says.

"Maybe," Gale says.

Bucky's hand rubs over the front of his crotch, warm and insistent. Gale shifts in Bucky's lap, toes pressing into the linoleum. Can feel how hard Bucky is against him. He shivers when Bucky's lips brush the shell of his ear.

"Just how long do you think you can keep this up for, sweetheart? We both know I'll have you begging for it by the time the record finishes."

Gale flushes and grips the newspaper tighter. "I've never begged for it."

"No?"

Bucky's fingers dip beneath the waistband of his shorts, then pull out.

"Who're you dripping for, then?"

"Jesus—"

"You ever touch yourself when I'm not here?" Bucky shoves his hand back into Gale's shorts. "You ever fuck yourself with your fingers and come like that?"

Gale swallows. Stills. He has, once, wearing Bucky's shirt, the one he does yardwork in. Gale had picked it up from hanging haphazardly over the dresser to toss into the laundry when the smell hit him like a gut punch. He'd put it on, then somehow Bucky's shirt became the only thing he was wearing, then somehow he was in their bed, three fingers stuffed inside himself.

His lack of answer very quickly becomes an answer. Bucky swells against him.

"Oh," he says. "Oh, you *have*."

Gale wants to bury himself in the paper. It's not shame, not really, but sometimes the enormity of his own desire still catches Gale by surprise, and Bucky has a mouth on him that could make the devil blush. The words on the newspaper have become a bunch of blurred lines and Gale's leaking all over Bucky's hand, feels like he's about to drip down his leg and make a mess on the kitchen floor.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Bucky says, and bites at Gale's shoulder blade through his t-shirt.

He doesn't say anything or do anything else. He just keeps touching Gale's cock and rubbing his own against the seam of his ass. It's a lot at once and Gale's not the man he used to pretend to be. He lets go of the newspaper and turns in Bucky's lap.

"Don't you want to know how I did it?" he says, voice pitched low and sweet. "What I was wearing?"

"What you were—" Bucky blinks, slow, pupils already blown out. Then, "What were you wearing?"

"I know you can ask me nicer than that," Gale says.

"Please," Bucky says, because he's that easy, and Gale loves him for it. "Please, come on, tell me."

Gale tells him. The sentence is barely out of his mouth before Bucky is hauling them both out of the kitchen.

They're upstairs and back down again in thirty minutes. The record is spinning silently in the living room, begging to be turned over. Gale steps into the kitchen and grabs the newspaper from where it'd been pushed to the floor and folds it up neatly again, sets it on the table. The clock in the kitchen says it's nearly nine am. It's a Kit-Cat Klock from the '30s that Bucky found and is fiercely fond of. Gale watches his tail swing back and forth a moment.

There's a knock at the front door.

Gale frowns and pitches back into the living room. Bucky is a still life over the record player, the vinyl held flipped in his hands. He sets it down but doesn't set the needle.

"Are we expecting someone?"

The knock comes again, then Croz's voice: "Hey, Buck, Bucky. You guys in? It's Croz!"

Something heavy drops into Gale's chest. He sees it drops into Bucky's. They haven't showered from the sex they finished having not ten minutes ago, dressed again in the same clothes. Gale knows his hair is a mess because Bucky's hair is a mess. A deep, terrified part of him wants to grab Bucky's hand, run out the kitchen door into the woods and never stop running.

"Yeah," Gale says. "Just a minute."

He and Bucky duck into the bathroom and fix their hair up, Gale running down a mental list of what he can say to make Croz leave, what he can say to make Croz understand. His mind is blank. Next to him, Bucky's pulse is jumping in his neck.

"It's okay," Bucky says. "It's fine."

His voice lacks its usual lazy confidence. Gale pulls on a pair of trousers and opens the door.

His anxiety melts a little when he sees Croz standing there. The sweet set of his eyes, the earnest swell of his smile. He's got a hat on in the early March wind, nose pinked from the cool air. His car is parked next to their truck in the driveway. Neither of them must have heard it before, when they—Gale breathes.

"You son of a gun," he says. "What're you doing out here?"

"Jean is on bedrest and her folks have the baby and I thought, hell, why not finally go see the Buckies?"

Gale shakes Croz's hand and welcomes him inside, Bucky right there to greet him, also dressed now.

"Well, if it ain't the father," he says. "Did we know you were coming?"

"No." Croz pulls his hat off. "Sorry. It was a spur of the moment decision. I called from a payphone when I got into town, but the line must have been busy."

Gale hangs his hat up for him and tells him not to worry about it. He doesn't look at Bucky. He can't. He feels like he's flying with busted engines, no landing gear, nothing. Like he's about to fall right out of the sky. Croz steps further into the house and gasps.

"Holy mackerel," he says. "Holy mackerel, you two, this looks—I mean this is a completely different house."

He runs a hand down the wallpaper, nodding, then turns to the fireplace. Croz has always had that manic, flighty energy to him. Nothing seems to have changed that. He asks if the fireplace really works again and Bucky laughs, says of course it does.

"Wow, and look at this chair," Croz says. "Jesus, you guys really did the place up."

He walks into the kitchen and yells, "Ha, the clock!" Gale and Bucky don't follow him. Gale finally allows himself to look at Bucky, aware of the nervous set of his eyes. Bucky smiles at him, and even though it's weak, it's reassuring anyway. Gale wants to touch him. Feels bile crawl up his throat at the sudden realization that he can't. He lives here and he can't even touch Bucky right now.

Croz comes out of the kitchen and heads right for the stairs.

"Whoa, slow down," Bucky says. "Don't you want a cup of coffee or something?"

"I'd love one," Croz says, not slowing down. "Just want to check out the old room first."

Gale listens to the sound of his footsteps on the hardwood. The door to Gale's old room opening. The bed is still made up, but the sheets are dusty from disuse, the room crowded by the desk. He listens again to Croz going across the hall. It feels as though someone has put a lens very close to Gale's face, is peering at him through a telescope, and he can't move. He can only listen. There's just silence. A moment of silence that seems so long Gale can't even think to perceive it as time at all. Then Croz's footsteps come down the stairs again.

"Hey," he says, then swallows, once, twice, three times. "Hey, I just remembered I need to get back to Des Moines. Got a—got a guy coming about—well, I need to get back, is all."

"Sure," Bucky says. "Raincheck on the coffee."

Croz is already at the front door. He pulls his hat on crooked.

"I really shouldn't have stopped by without calling first."

"It's okay," Gale says, unsure who he's saying that to.

Croz nods, eyes flitting between them briefly, because he saw. Gale knows what he saw. The bed unmade, sleep indents on both pillows. Gale and Bucky's watches nestled together on the bedside table. Their clothes folded on the dresser. A whole life he was never meant to see. Gale feels violated and ashamed and angry and scared.

"Okay," Croz says. "Okay, well, I'll—okay."

The second the door shuts, Gale presses his palm over his mouth, as if to keep something else from escaping. Being lost. He hears Croz's car turn over, then back out of the driveway.

"Shit," Bucky says. "Shit."

"He's going to call the police," Gale says, dropping his hand.

"No, he's not."

Gale stares at the door.

"Hey," Bucky says. "Buck, come on, he's not—"

Bucky grabs his hand and Gale's whole body rushes with adrenaline. He jerks back, ignores the look of hurt in Bucky's eyes and how his heart is pounding too hard.

"It's *illegal,* Bucky. It's—"

Gale looks at the living room. Struck now with the sudden urge to erase everything. They can't take anything from him if it's already gone. They can't take Bucky if Gale doesn't have him. He starts dragging the smoking chair to the door, the legs scraping on the floor. Bucky bodies into him, pushing the chair back.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"We have to get rid of this," Gale says. "All of it. Get the fuck out of the way, Bucky."

"*No*," Bucky says. He looks panicked, and Gale hates him for that, for not getting it. "Calm down for a second, okay?"

"Just let me get rid of it before they do!"

Bucky backs away from him like he's been hit. Gale sags against the chair, wildly out of breath.

"Gale," he says. "No one is taking us away from each other."

His voice is gentle and soft and hurt. Gale can hardly stand to look at him. He stays propped up by the smoking chair a moment. He believes what Bucky is saying, and that's the problem. He believes him, he always does, but all Gale can think about is that first mission in Europe. How no one told him things would be like that, like losing all hope and waiting to see if he could find it again. Gale doesn't think he could bear to try, if the hope he's losing is Bucky. He turns without a word and walks out the kitchen door.

He's halfway to the tree line, feet crunching on the dead grass when Bucky catches up to him.

"What are you doing?" Bucky says. "Where are you going?"

"Go back inside, Bucky."

He just needs quiet. He needs to shove it down again, go into the freezing water and let his mind blank, let everything go. Gale makes it to the trees. Ignores the prick of sticks against his bare feet and strips his shirt off, the creek in view now, just thawed again from winter. Bucky scoffs behind him.

"You getting in the creek? You think I won't follow you in there?"

Gale ignores him, feet already touching the water. It's too cold and he doesn't care. Then Bucky rushes in front of him, still dressed, the hem of his pants staining wet from the water. Gale tenses.

"Bucky, stop. The water's freezing."

Bucky looks back at him. His face is calm.

"If you're going in, I'm going in."

"Bucky—hey!"

Gale jerks forward just as Bucky goes to jump and grabs him by the sleeve of his shirt, yanks him back so hard they both tumble onto the earth. When Bucky moves like he's going to try and get up again, Gale throws a leg over him, clings to him with both arms. So desperate to hold him he's spitting, teeth bared.

"You think I wouldn't?" Bucky says. "You think I wouldn't follow you anywhere?"

He's still struggling. Doesn't stop until Gale climbs on top of him, body heavy and wrung out. He's covered in dirt and sticks and dead leaves. Bucky's thumb wipes at his cheek, and that's when Gale realizes he's crying.

"I know you would," Gale says. "I know you would. I know."

Gale has never cried in front of him before. He can't remember the last time he's even cried at all. Bucky wipes again at Gale's cheek. Gale feels himself go limp, fingers curling into Bucky's t-shirt. He holds onto it tightly, the cotton snagging. He's dripping tears all over Bucky's face.

"I know you would," he says again.

"You won't lose me," Bucky tells him, his voice so sure that there is no room to argue, and Gale doesn't want to.

He collapses against him, forehead pressed to Bucky's, until his body is wrung dry. And even then he can't move, so Bucky holds onto him until he can.

The next few days around the house are sluggish and mournful. Croz doesn't call, and Gale and Bucky don't call him. They don't leave the house. Bucky offers Gale's old room back to him, but Gale refuses. They have their own room, and that's where they'll be sleeping.

Gale keeps expecting the police to knock on the door, only they don't. Nothing happens. It's almost worse. He walks out the kitchen door and watches the barn, silent. Wishes to hear the sound of horses. He and Bucky had been so close, Gale thinks, so close to having a life together. For a while, they had. And maybe that was all Gale's life was ever going to be—a series of glimpses into what might have been.

"Hey, you're not about to try and walk into the creek again, are you?" Bucky says.

He plants a kiss on Gale's shoulder and Gale leans back into him, lets Bucky take his weight.

"Just thinking," he says.

"Well, stop that and come inside. Too early in the day for thinking."

They play poker at the kitchen table for matchsticks. Gale presses his bare feet to Bucky's, caught between joy and grief.

The shrill ring of the telephone startles them both. They stare at each other, cards suspended in their hands, breath frozen, a conversation passing between without words, before Gale stands up and goes to the living room. He picks up before the last ring. Holds the receiver out so Bucky can hear too.

"Hello?" he says.

"Hi," Croz says. "Is this, uh, is this a bad time?"

His voice makes Gale momentarily riddled with all the feelings of Sunday. He sniffs.

"No. Not a bad time."

Gale taps his finger against the phone. He can't look away from Bucky.

"Is it okay if I come by? Just me," Croz says.

Bucky blinks a few times, then nods, and Gale nods back.

"Sure. We'll be here."

"Okay," Croz says, and he's the one who sounds relieved.

He says he'll be there around one, and Gale hangs up, breath rushing out of his mouth so hard his cheeks balloon. There's almost too much that Gale could think, so his mind simply goes blank. Bucky leans his weight into the wall, then scrubs both hands over his face.

"Okay," he says. "That's two friggin' hours."

It feels like the longest two hours of their lives. They put the cards and matchsticks away. Take turns showering. Gale makes up the bed, but they don't change anything else about the house. Croz already knows and there's no point in putting on a front. He said he was coming alone, and he has never been anything but an honest man. There's no reason not to believe him.

At exactly two minutes past one o'clock, Croz knocks on the door.

The visit begins almost eerily like the first. Croz shakes their hands, pulls his hat off, takes in the house again and is blown away by the work they've done again. His movements and smile seem genuine. Earnest. He pauses in the middle of the living room and clears his throat.

"Could I have that cup of coffee now?" he asks.

"Yeah," Gale says. "Of course you can."

The three of them sit at the kitchen table together with coffee, the Kit-Cat Klock looking on, eyes ticking back and forth. Croz holds his coffee cup in both hands like a little kid. He hasn't said a word since he asked for some milk to put in his coffee. Gale doesn't mean to stare expectantly at him, but he's starting to feel like he's going crazy just sitting here.

"You know," Croz says, then pauses. He sets his coffee cup on the table. "You know, before I knocked on the door last week, I saw you

two had been fixing up the barn. My grandparents had horses here when I was kid. Then we never, uh, we sold them after they passed."

"Buck grew up around horses," Bucky says. "He thought it'd be nice to have them here again."

Gale says nothing. He's not sure yet where this is going. Croz looks at them both.

"That's why it's good you're here," he says. "I never would've done that. I never would've made this old house into such a nice home. Jesus, that's why everyone in the 100th loved you two. You always made everything better, every time you were in the room."

Croz leans back, sighing, gaze turned to the window. He drags his hand through his hair.

"Just shocked me the other day is all. I didn't know you two were…uh, didn't know you were—"

"—Queer," Bucky finishes.

Gale squeezes his knee briefly. Croz's eyes pop wider at the word but he nods.

"Yeah. I thought—it doesn't matter. You two kept so many of us alive during the war, not just in the air. You kept us alive because you were together, and that's important. More important than—" Croz inhales so hard his stomach distends, then he exhales noisily. "—I'm trying to say —Jesus Christ, help me out here, I'm drowning."

"You're trying to say that you don't care?" Gale says.

"Yes." Croz gestures so wildly at him he nearly knocks his coffee cup over. "I mean no, yes, that's what I'm saying. I don't care. You're good men, the other stuff doesn't matter. I thought about it and, I just can't see why it should matter."

He exhales again and takes a sip of his coffee. Gale wants to run out the kitchen door again, just not for the same reason he did on Sunday. Croz smiles at them both.

"Listen, I talked to Jean and my folks—I didn't tell them about you two or anything—but I told them about how much you both loved this place and that if you were amenable, we'd, y'know, we'd sell you the farmhouse."

"You'd what?" Gale says, grabbing for Bucky's hand without thinking.

"We want to sell you the house," Croz says. "My parents don't want it. I've nearly got two kids, no reason to use it. This house is basically yours, anyway."

He pulls a folded-up piece of paper from his coat pocket and slides it across the table. Gale unfolds the paper, leans into Bucky so they can look together. The asking price is fair, actually less than what it should be, even deducting the work they've done. Gale realizes his hands are shaking, so he sets the paper on the table. Looks at Bucky and knows. They're going to buy this house. It's going to be theirs. He doesn't know how to begin to thank Croz for this.

Bucky clears his throat and stands up.

"Let me, uh, let me just talk to Buck here for a second." He pats Gale's shoulder. "We'll be right back."

Gale follows him to the living room, frowning.

"What do we need to talk about?"

Bucky spins around and grabs him by the waist.

"Not a damn thing, but I'm gonna burst if I don't kiss you and I don't think Croz is ready to see that."

"I can't believe you've been going through life being this dramatic," Gale says, then he kisses him first, knowing damn well Croz can hear.

He's up early to tend to the horses. The sun has just broken the horizon, pink ribbons of clouds piped across the spring sky. Gale clicks his tongue twice as he walks into the barn. Dolly and Misty are already awake to greet him, two Quarter Horses being boarded from some folks in Des Moines. Dolly's coloring is chestnut, her tail and mane black. Misty is white all over.

"Hello, ladies," Gale says.

He's just finished feeding them when Bucky comes into the barn with

two cups of coffee and a kiss. He's sleepy-eyed and shuffling in his slippers. Pulls a carrot out of his robe pocket and feeds it to Dolly. Gale throws him a look.

"They just ate."

"You're such a stickler," Bucky says, petting Dolly's muzzle. "Isn't he such a stickler?"

Gale softens and takes a sip of coffee. Bucky had been a little wary of the horses when they first arrived, but now he joins Gale in the barn most mornings to help muck out the stalls, will run them in the daytime with him. The money is good, too, only now that the house is nearly all fixed up, they're itching for a new routine. Closing on the house had kept them busy for a bit, all those trips back and forth to the bank. They've got the deed locked in a safe in their bedroom. Both of their names signed to it.

"I gotta go into town later," Bucky says. "Frank mentioned something about a job teaching civilians how to fly lightplanes."

It's charming, imagining Bucky in a small plane, compared to their forts. For a while, Gale was half-convinced that Bucky was going to take over running the bar with Frank, but he understands it, the desire to be off the ground. Gale hasn't told Bucky yet, but he thinks he wants to go back to school in the next few years. He wants to study space. He used to dream about going back to school and never took the thought seriously, only now he believes he could really do it. Thinks about it whenever he goes to the mailbox and sees "Cleven and Egan" painted on the side, whenever he goes out alone and people ask why Bucky isn't with him. Because Bucky is meant to be. Always has been.

"You've got your first pick-up game tomorrow with Charlie and The Boys, don't forget." Gale pauses. "I still don't know those boys' names."

Bucky's been practicing with them for weeks, all secretive about it, told Gale not to come watch, not until the first game, like he's been practicing just for him.

"*They* don't know their names." Bucky pulls another carrot out of his robe and feeds it to Misty. "You'll be there, right? Cheering me on?"

"I'll be heckling you," Gale says.

Bucky blows him a kiss. "Don't sweet talk me in front of the horses."

"They can handle it and so can you. Can't you, darlings?"

Gale rubs the underside of Dolly's muzzle, aware of what he's said. Doesn't know why it's taken him so long to. He hears Bucky inhale.

"Darlings?"

Gale turns to him. Bucky's face is flushed.

"Mm," Gale says. "The horses. And you. My darlings."

"Come here," Bucky says. "I love you, come here."

And Gale goes to him. To their house. To their bedroom. To their life.

End Notes

title from the *stars* song of the same name

thank you tumblr user crowthis for listening to me yap about this for i don't even KNOW how long truly a burden of love (both this fic and her being my friend). huge thoughts and feelings about ww2 yaoi happening to me this spring apparently!!

also yes gale at the end calling bucky and the horses his darlings is very much inspired by brokeback mountain! gale you are so ennis coded to me~

thank you so much for reading xx i am on tumblr @stereobone

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!